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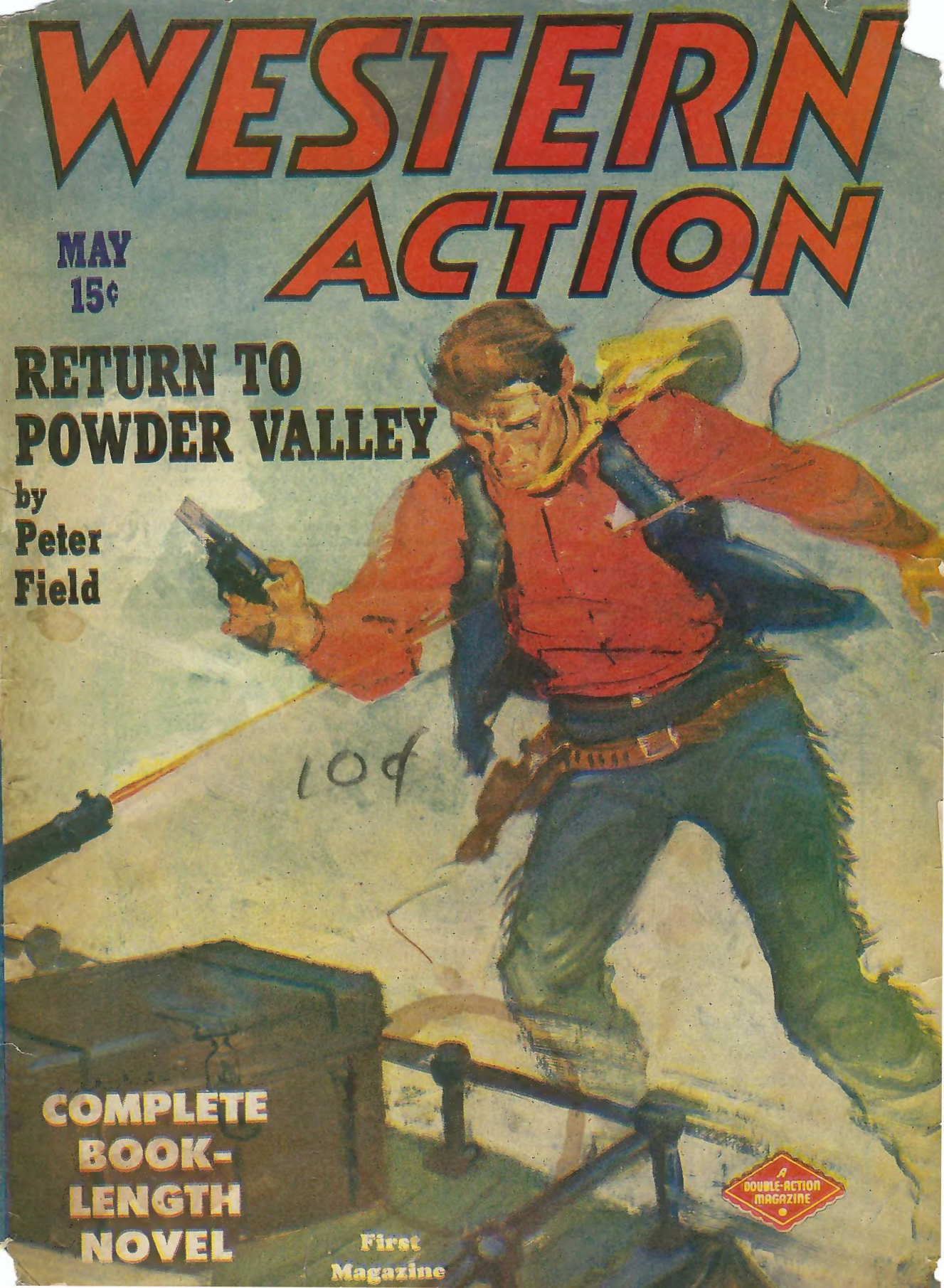
RETURN TO POWDER VALLEY

by Peter Field



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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 13 May, 1949 Number 4

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH POWDER VALLEY NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

RETURN TO POWDER VALLEY

by Peter Field 6

Pat Stevens hadn't intended to leave Powder Valley, but now that he was back, there was a lot of lost time to make up here . . . time during which nearly all of his neighbors suddenly found that their spreads had been sold for taxes they were sure had been paid. And Pat found his ranch, too, along the lot sold secretly, and his tax recently missing . . .

★ PLUS ★

IT RAINED RATTLESNAKES! ..... by L. C. Davis 89

NIGHTMARE ..... by Dorothy Stapleton 94

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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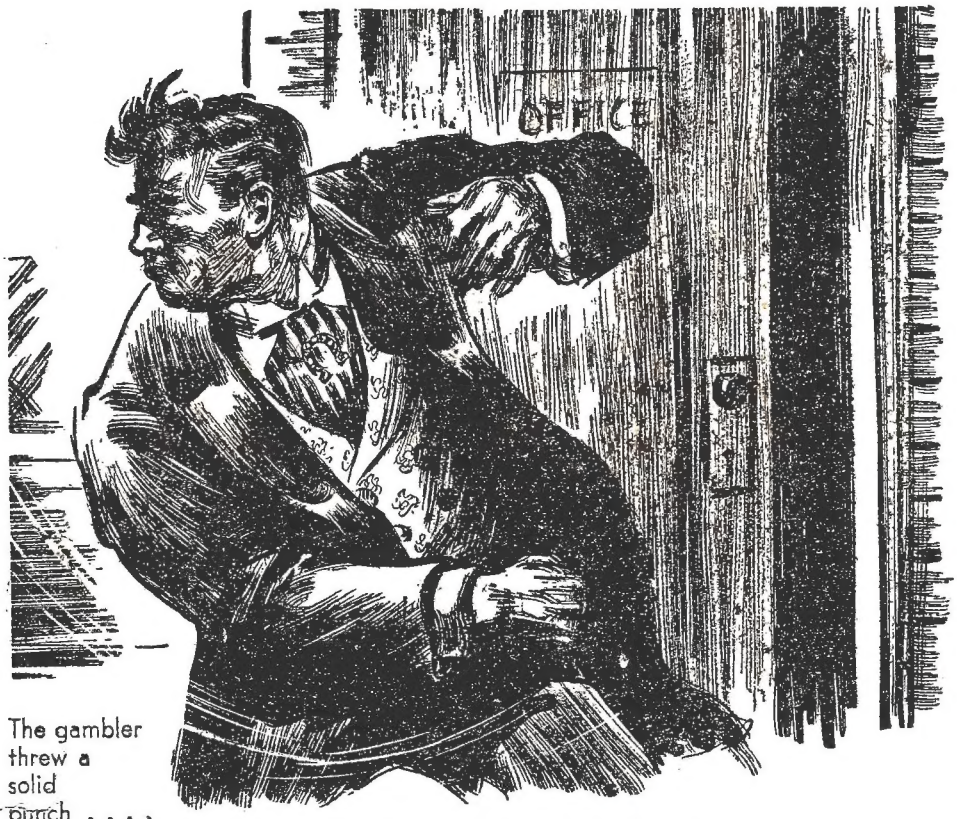
Powder Valley had changed almost beyond recognition in the three months that Pat Stevens had been away. Now, he returned to find his own ranch, as well as the ranches of the other inhabitants suddenly sold for back taxes which all were sure they had paid—only everyone's tax receipts seemed to be missing . . .

Return To Powder Valley

By Peter Field

Complete Book-Length Novel



The gambler threw a solid punch . . . .

(First Magazine Publication)

PAT STEVENS raised his long frame in the saddle and let his eyes drift over the familiar Culebra Range country. His big, black-bearded companion was lagging behind. Pat yelled down the trail. "Gig that sorrel, Kelly. What's ailing you? Getting scared you're going to lose on your bet, now that we're almost in sight of the valley?"

Ben Kelly's voice rumbled through the mountain gap. "Don't worry about me, Stevens. I'll be right behind you when you get there. I'll be right on

your tail to point out the changes that you're betting me couldn't come to Powder Valley."

Pat tried to relax in the saddle—to tell himself he was glad to be back home. It would be good to see his pals, Ezra and Sam; but coming home was also hell. The flowers made Pat remember the bouquets of columbine that Sally had picked to brighten the ranch house. And the blue spruce made him recall the one she'd wanted moved into the yard of their Lazy Mare ranch. Pat had never got around to moving it. Now it was too late.

Sally was dead and young Dock, too—killed when their buckboard plunged over the rimrock on the Yuka Canyon trail many months ago; Sam Sloan had lost his wife and child a few months before.

On the morning following the double funeral for his wife and son, Pat Stevens had risen early from a sleepless night, gone to the corral, saddled the nearest horse to his roping hand and started off.

His old pals, swarthy, rugged little Sam Sloan and giant, red-haired Ezra, had come running out as Pat rode by. Pat had called back, "I'm taking a little ride to clear my head. Reckon I'll be back by the time one of you gets breakfast ready."

He had tried to inject into his voice that old, easy, sure ring for he had sworn during the night not to bother anyone with his grief. And as he had ridden away, it had been his intention to return in time for breakfast. But the farther he rode from the Lazy Mare and Powder Valley, the scene of his greatest happiness and deepest sorrow, the harder it grew to turn back.

It had not been like the decisive, steady, dependable Pat to run away from anything. But the loss of his family had done something to him that nothing else had ever done now, after many long months of wandering in search of forgetfulness and salve for his pain, Pat Stevens was coming home.

The trail through Alto Pass over the Culebra Range was leveling off. Soon it would drop sharply on the eastern slope and there below would be Powder Valley.

AHEAD, the trail spread in a Y. Pat barked to Kelly over his shoulder. "We turn left. And move that sorrel along before you get lost." Pat's voice sounded harsh and cold. But he was just a young buck whistling to keep his real emotions from showing.

"You'll see," Ben Kelly bellowed up the trail. "You'll see just what I told you when we met and made that bet over in Ute country. I said it then and I'll say it again. Dutch Springs and Powder Valley is shot full of miners and gamblers and owlhoots where it used to be a nice peaceful place, folks said."

Pat sat his saddle like a stone man. His bay gelding took the sharp turn in the trail and braced himself for the sharper descent, moving stiff-legged and shifting his rump heavily as he scrabbled down the slope.

A thick growth of brush and scrub cedar blocked Pat's view. But he knew that Powder Valley lay below him. The reins in his hand trembled and there was a pounding in the back of his head. Something was choking him. He tried to swallow it but it only grew worse.

Ben Kelly was booming on about winning his bet. "I can sure use that fifty. I got a throat drier than a buffalo skull in a desert." He gigged his sorrel to come even with Pat on the rim.

"See what I told you?" Ben pointed. "Look how Dutch Springs has growed. There's the gold strike—one of 'em—up at the head of the valley. You can make out the sluice boxes if you look sharp. And those new buildings at the end of Main Street at the Springs. They're the new —" He glanced sidewise at Pat to see if he was listening.

Pat's eyes were focused on a green patch up the valley. He was looking at his Lazy Mare ranch with the cotton-woods hiding most of the ranch house. The only part that showed was a little of the east end gable.

Ben's heavy brows met as he watched Pat. The young man was sitting motionless, oblivious to everything except that green spot below them.

"Darn me," Kelly muttered. "That Stevens betting me I was wrong about things in the valley. Reckon he just egged me into coming to keep him company."

Neither man moved for some time, the younger man engrossed in what he saw, the older respectful of his feelings for the moment.

Slowly, Pat tore his eyes from the Lazy Mare and glanced at the miniature village of Dutch Springs. "What'd you say those new buildings was at the end of Main Street, Kelly?" Pat's voice was suddenly low and calm.

Kelly shifted his eyes down the valley. "Them new buildings? The one with the wide veranda on the board sidewalk? That's the new gambling hall. Forget the name of the man owns that one. I heard there was another one and a dance hall and they both burned down mysterious. That building next to the new gambling place is the new dance hall."

Pat gigged his bay gelding, starting him down the trail along the face of the rim. He turned to Kelly who had headed his sorrel down after him. "That's my place down below. The green spot."

"Think I couldn't tell by the way you was looking at it," Kelly said. "Looks like a neat place from here."

Pat shook his head. "Hurts like hell to come back but it hurt worse to stay away."

"What'd you say?"

"None of your business," Pat snapped.

His eyes had shifted from the Lazy Mare and were ranging back up the Yuka Gulch from Dutch Springs. "Kelly, what's that circle of wagons up past Dutch Springs?"

"Wagons?" Kelly repeated. "Ain't no wagons that I recollect up—" He stopped to look. "Jumping horn toads. Didn't hear anything about a wagon train camping hereabouts." He looked harder. "That's funny. Them boomers is camped in a circle like they was prepared for an Indian attack."

"They don't look like boomer outfits to me. Look more like a special company of one kind or another."

Kelly chuckled. "Hey, Stevens, I'm glad you tricked me into coming back with you."

"I didn't trick you," Pat said. I'll pay you the fifty dollars. It's worth it just for your ornery company. Wait till we get down off the face of this cliff."

"Just the same," Kelly said, "I'm glad I come. Looks like this valley might be a heap more exciting than back in Ute country trying to dig copper out of a roasting desert."

PAT turned his eyes back to the Lazy Mare. He was suddenly standing in his stirrups, staring at the ranch. The trail had brought him around so that he could see it from a better angle. And what he saw didn't please him. "Kelly," he said, "take a look at my coral. What kind of horses you see there?"

"Don't see no horse. Yes, I do, too. Over in the shade of the barn. Hey, them ain't no saddle horses. They look like something left over from a jerkline outfit, Stevens."

"That's what I'm thinking, too. And, Kelly, take a look at the barn door. What you see sticking out of that?"

Kelly squinted, reared back in his saddle. "Looks like a wagon tongue and 'tached to it looks like one of them Conestoga wagons like the boomers got in a circle."

Pat had put spurs to his bay. The horse snorted and began sliding down the steep trail. "That's what it looked like to me, too," Pat said. "Only they look bigger than Conestogas. Same kind of wagon that they got, fifty strong, in that circle east of town."

He heard Kelly's voice, well up the trail, calling, "Hold up there. What you trying to do, kill yourself?"

But Pat wasn't holding up. Again he put spurs to the bay and the animal jumped, made a leap for a level bench, landed and went charging down the shale slope toward the plain below.

Sally and young Dock had been killed when their wagon went off the road . . . .
(Chapter One)

Far behind, Kelly kept yelling, bellowing his lungs out about something that Pat couldn't hear.

Rocks and gravel tumbled behind the bay in a shower. Sliding, scrabbling, snorting, the gelding tore down the steep slope, and bounced out on the open flat.

Pat was leaning in the saddle, riding him on a dead run for the Lazy Mare. And now that he was on a level with the ranch, he could see much more.

There was a line of clothes hanging between the back of the house and the pump. There were women's clothes on the line. At least that nightshirt looked like a woman's nightshirt. Certainly neither Ezra nor Sam would wear a thing like that, if they were right minded. This garment had ruffled lace around the collar.

His eyes flashed to the barn where he could see the wagon more clearly. It was a big prairie schooner. Bigger than most. Seemed to be specially built.

He reined the bay over and headed for the side door of the house.

The ranch house looked about the same. He sent the gelding up to the house at a fast trot. A sudden flash of momentary pleasure ran through him as he thought of greeting his old friends.

"Ezra—Sam!" he bellowed their names louder than necessary. It would keep his deeper emotions from coming to the surface.

He dropped to the ground while the bay was plunging a stop. Pat hit running and let go the reins. It was

good to be home and he was heading for the side door that led into the kitchen.

A figure appeared at the rear corner of the house and a voice bellowed at him. "Stop where you are!"

Pat's boots burned the gravel. His body stopped rigid and cold. A tall, rangy man with a long, sad face stood at the corner of the house. His eyes were full of a savage desperation and his bony hands held a double-barreled shotgun with hammers cocked.

He held two fingers tight against the two triggers and he spoke in the same deep voice as before. "Make one more move, young man, and I'll blow you to pieces."

2

PAT'S hands moved nearer his guns. He said, "How come you to be using my house, Mister? Where's Ezra and Sam Sloan?"

"Who?" the man said.

Pat eased his position, and the man jerked his shotgun. "Don't make any foolish moves. I don't want to have to kill you in self-defense. And don't tell me you're another town marshal or deputy sheriff."

"You're beginning to interest me, Mister," Pat said.

Ben Kelly came riding up then on his sorrel. He reined, said, "Whoa! What's going on, Stevens? Who's this giraffe with a scattergun on you?"

"Don't you come any closer," the man warned Kelly.

"Don't worry, I won't," Kelly said. "That scattergun looks like it could blow a hole as big as a house through a horse. I only come to ask this man you're holding up to pay me the fifty dollars he lost to me in a bet."

"You're a hard man, Kelly," Pat said. "I'll give you what I got on me and owe you the rest. I was figuring Ezra and Sam would be here and have some of my money laying around." He turned to the man at the corner of the house. "You don't mind if I take out a little time to pay my debts, Mister?"

"Just so you don't come closer nor try any tricks."

Pat turned and took out a small roll of bills. He handed it up to Kelly. "That's all I got. Count it and let me know how much I owe you."

Ben Kelly thumbed through the bills. Ten, fifteen, twenty. Twenty-one, twenty-two...." He laughed and stuck the money in his pocket. "That'll do for now. Sure worked up a thirst coming down. Something I can do for you here, Stevens?"

"Not unless you can read the mind of this double-barreled trespasser and see what's brought him down here."

Ben Kelly licked his lips, glanced down the valley toward the dust cloud that hung over Dutch Springs. "I'll sure be seeing you, Stevens, I'll tell the boys in the saloon that you're back. Everybody'll be mighty glad to know it. When I was here before, folks said you were the best lawman they ever had."

"Hold on," Pat said. "Maybe it'd be just as well not to say nothing about knowing me, Kelly. There's something mighty peculiar going on here. And I don't know yet who's mixed up in it. Guess I'll keep to the back trails till I get a better idea anyway."

"Hell, I was hoping I could brag a little on riding down with such a man as you, Stevens."

"I'll be seeing you around," Pat said.

"Sure I can't help with your friend there?"

"We'll get along. Him and his shotgun don't look so terrible dangerous if I don't make any wrong moves. Just scared and desperate, I reckon, eh, stranger?"

The man stood motionless, watching him.

"So long," Ben Kelly called. He gigged his sorrel and rode down the valley at a fast single foot.

"Now," Pat said. "Where was we?"

"Who are you?" the man said.

"Well, I was figuring on getting your answer first, but I don't reckon it makes much difference. My name's Stevens. Pat Stevens. I own this ranch."

"I'm afraid you're wrong there," the man said. "My name is Luke Brice. I bought this ranch for my sick wife to rest in. I paid six thousand dollars, all the money we'd brought with us. I bought it fair and square and got the deed and we're going to stay no matter what the town marshal or the mayor or anybody in Dutch Springs says. And don't you start any new tricks. Night or day, I'll shoot the first man that comes within fifty feet of the house."

"You got a sick wife, you say?" Pat's voice softened.

Cy Weatherville gave out final instructions as they awaited the attack . . . .
(Chapter Sixteen)

The man studied him. "Mean to say you don't know?"

"I'm trying to tell you," Pat said. "I ain't been in Powder Valley for months, mighty near a year, in fact."

THE MAN'S eyes narrowed. He backed a step or two until he was half shielded by the corner of the house. "If you figure I'm going to believe your story, you're wrong. Don't think any of your tricks, like paying off that other man before me, is going to fool me into letting you come close enough to turn the tables."

"You're being mighty hard to get

along with," Pat said. "Fact is, I meant you harm when I first come. A man finds another on his own property and it riles him some. But this play I'm facing looks like a lot of things has been going on since I left the valley."

"I only been here two weeks," Brice said. "I wouldn't know what was here before you left."

"We had a peaceful place as cowtowns go. Except in a few cases, everybody was kindly."

"That's the way Emma and I like to live," the man said wistfully. "Peaceful and kindly among our kind of folks. That's why we came out."

"I'd sure like to see that deed you got to this ranch," Pat said.

"You don't get a look at nothing," Brice said. "And now it's about time you were moving on. I can't stand out here all day and I don't budge in the house till I see you riding far down the valley trail."

"And I don't aim to leave here and go riding down no trail until I get good and ready. That's going to leave one of us tired enough to drop off to sleep before we get through waiting each other out. Me, I don't need much sleep."

Brice leaned heavily against the corner of the house at the mere suggestion. He steadied the shotgun with his hand braced to the corner board. "It won't do you any good to hang around," he said.

Pat shifted his weight to the other foot. He studied Luke Brice for a long time, then he said, "Partner, you'd like mighty much to believe I'm not harmful, wouldn't you?"

Brice hesitated.

"Tell you what you can do to make sure I'm telling the truth. If I told you about little things in the house and you found I knew they was there, would you believe me?"

"Don't think you're going to get me to go back in the house and see," Brice said. "I tell you I'm on to all your tricks. Just because that town marshal ain't with you now ain't fooling me in the least."

"You talk more interesting all the time," Pat said. "I'll fix it so you won't mind going into the house to look at what I tell you. Now let's see." Pat studied the top of the tallest cottonwood that rose from the front yard. "Take that bed in the front room. There used to be a busted slat in it. As I recollect it was the middle slat. Had a crack in it but it didn't give clear through and I never got time to make another one."

"That slat broke," Brice said. He waited.

"Well," Pat continued, "you might take a look under a loose floor board to the right of the fireplace. Used to be a place to hide papers and money under that board. You may not find anything but a tin box under there now. But that should be there."

Luke Brice shook his head. "Wouldn't find anything under there now, or at least there ain't any loose boards. They're all nailed down solid. I went around and tried 'em before I bought the house."

"You don't buy nothing without being sure it's sound, do you?"

"We earned our money hard and we aim to get our money's worth."

Pat stiffened. "Say wait a minute. I got my own deed in that box under the loose board. That ought to prove to you who owns this house." Pat started walking, momentarily forgetting danger.

LUKE BRICE raised the scattergun. One barrel roared in the clear air, and the charge of buckshot hissed over Pat's head as he flung himself to the ground. "I warned you," Brice growled.

Pat got up slowly from the dust of the yard, brushed himself off slowly, thoughtfully. "Ought to be an easier way of convincing you or killing myself," he said. "But that's a mighty funny thing if that board is nailed down tight."

"I tell you there's no use trying to bluff me any longer. Besides, you better move on right now. I got to get something for Emma to eat."

As he thought, Pat said, "What's ailing your wife?"

"Asthma. Nearly died while we were living in the wagon trail with the rest of our friends. That's why I had to buy this ranch for her. She

had to have a dry house to live in."

Pat brightened. "Listen to me, amigo. You go look in the upstairs room beside the single bed there. You'll find some pencil scrawlings on the wall."

Brice waited. "Well?"

Pat swallowed hard. "My son put those there."

"I'll admit they looked like the scrawlings of some kid," Brice said. "Where is he now?"

"Dead," he said gently. "Him and his mother both—killed in an accident."

Brice's hard, bony face softened. "I'm mighty sorry."

"That's why I left, trying to get squared away and maybe try to forget. But a man can't forget."

Brice nodded slowly. "Yes, I know. Emma and me, we lost a little girl back before we come out with the Land Prophets."

The two men stood motionless for a long moment, not looking at each other, just staring ahead into space.

Pat said, "Brice, I'd like mighty well to come into the house. If what you say is true about your wife and about buying it fair and square, I won't try to kick you out, even if I was the owner, which I still figure I am. But I'd sure like to take a look at that loose board beside the fireplace."

Brice stiffened. "Stevens," he said, "if you're lying about your loss, to trick me, I'll kill you with my bare hands. But if you're telling the truth, and I got no reason to doubt you much, come in and let's talk." He lowered his shotgun.

Pat came forward slowly, his head bowed a little. He could feel his guns slapping gently against his legs as he walked.

Luke Brice waited at the back corner of the house, then they walked to the side door together.

Neither spoke. Brice opened the door and nodded and Pat walked into his own house, his eyes taking in the familiar sights. The pump was there by the iron kitchen sink and there was the stove by the chimney that backed to the fireplace in the next room.

Brice spoke low. "Don't say anything about you owning the house before," he said. "My wife's hard of hearing and I got her on the other side of the house. She wouldn't hear what we said outside but now that we're inside, she might."

Pat nodded absently. He fingered the old pump handle. Felt the boards of the floor under his feet. Heard the familiar creaks in them.

Pat walked into the sitting room and around in front of the fireplace. For a moment he stood staring at the boards about the hearth, and then tried them with his boot. "They're nailed now," he said. "Solid."

"I told you," Brice said.

"Mind if I rip one up and see what's underneath?"

Brice was watching him closely. "I bought this house furnished as it is. Let's see if you know where the hammer and chisel is."

Pat turned. Brice followed him into the kitchen. In a cupboard behind the stove, Pat found the hammer and chisel for ripping up the floor board. The expression on his face never changed. He came back to the fireplace and bent down. Gently, he tapped the chisel so as not to make too much noise.

WITH a little prying, the nails came out. He sat hunched on his heels, studying the nails, comparing them with those in the other boards. "Funny thing," he said. "Somebody took the trouble to nail this board solid. You can see they used new nails. It wasn't so long ago, either."

Brice shrugged his big shoulders. "Reckon they wanted to have the house in good shape before selling it to me."

Pat sank hunkered, staring down into the hole that the torn-up floor board left. "Reckon they more likely wanted to cover evidence that they took something out from under the board," he said. He motioned Brice over where he could look into the hole.

Brice bent down. "See there?" Pat said. "See the marks of that tin box I mentioned having down there?"

Brice nodded. "I see the marks in

The Stevens ranch was under fire as Sam approached. (Chapter Four)

the dirt. But the box is gone. What do you make of that?"

Off in the other end of the house a woman coughed. Brice turned and left to attend her. Pat could hear him tell her a friend had come to help them against the marshal when he arrived. Brice also told her he'd get her supper directly. He came in, went to the kitchen and took her a dipper of water.

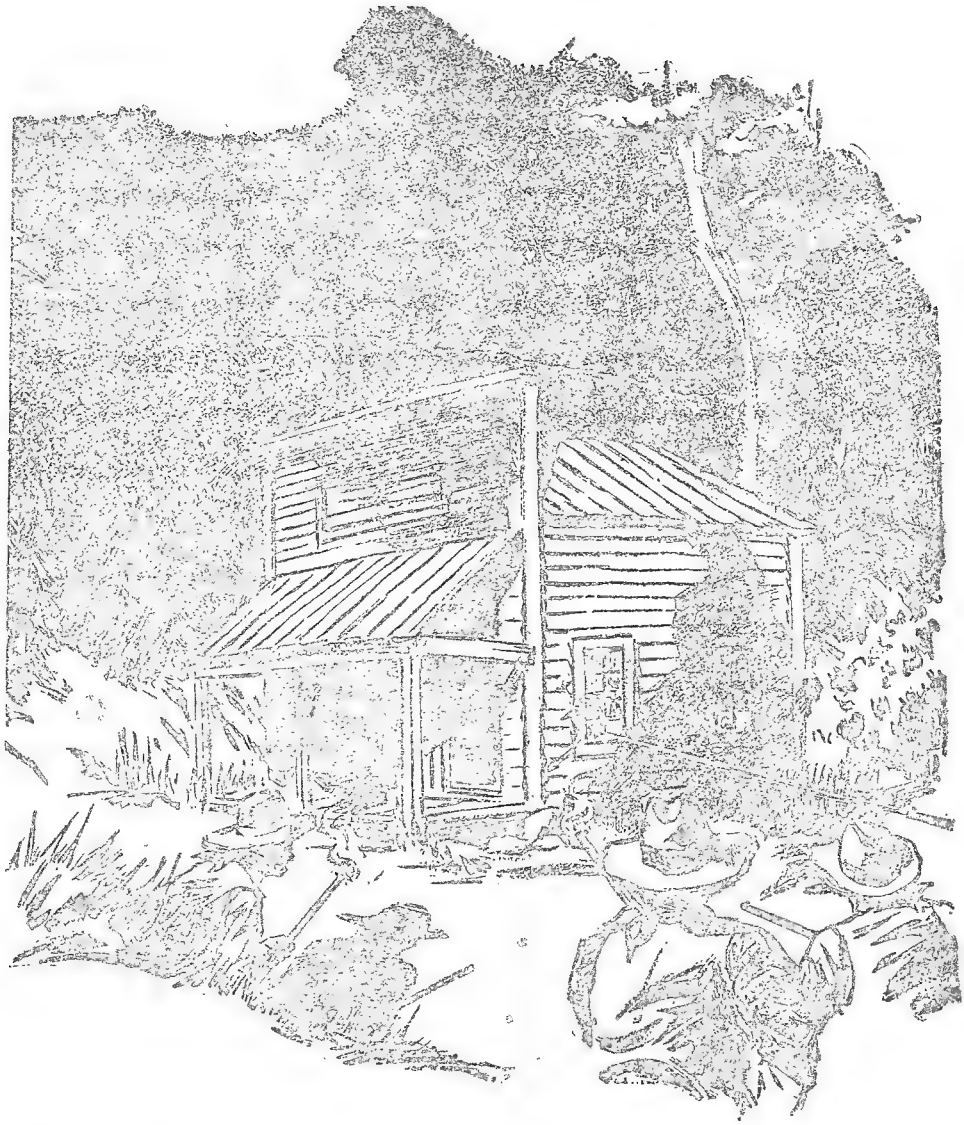
"You say you had your deed in that when you left?" Brice asked when he returned.

"Deed and receipts and other things," Pat said. He was pounding the board back into place. He stood up after he had finished.

"I'd be proud to have you stay for supper with me," Brice said.

"I'd sure like to stay. And maybe you can tell me how you got it figured I can help you against the marshal when he comes? Looks like there's a heap more I don't know than what I know."

"I don't know too much about it myself. Only I know they been using tricks to scare us off the ranch now that we bought it. One night they come up riding around in the pitch black, yelping and screaming and howling like a pack of banshees. They likely were trying to scare my wife. I got the scattergun and took a couple of shots. Don't know whether I winged any of 'em or not. Then another time, that was day before yesterday, that marshal come up and said we had two days to get out. He



tried to bluff me, saying they'd found out that the man that sold us the place didn't have any right to and if we didn't leave the country right off they'd come and burn the house down around us."

Pat scratched thoughtfully behind his right ear. "Who might this town marshal be and what right's he got this far out of town?"

"That's another thing I ain't got straight yet," Brice sad. "Seems there's a town marshal and also a sheriff and they cover the same territory."

"That I don't savvy," Pat said.

They had moved into the kitchen. Brice pointed to a sack of potatoes in the corner. "You can peel potatoes if you want while I slice some sow belly and mix up some sourdough."

Pat nodded and sat down in the straight-backed chair that Sally had used so often. He tried to keep his mind on Brice and his troubles and the mystery of Powder Valley.

"Near as I can figure it," Brice went on, slicing with the big hunting knife out of the drawer, "the sheriff and the town marshal are

working against each other but it ain't come to an out and out showdown. Seems from what I heard that the mayor and his bunch voted to include the whole country in the town limits of Dutch Springs. So that gives the town marshal authority over the same territory as the sheriff.

"That beats me," Pat said. He whittled on the potato in his hand. "You didn't tell me the names of these feuding lawmen."

"Like I said, I've only been here a couple of weeks. And I never could remember names. Anyhow, the marshal said we had until tonight to get off. Tonight they're coming up and burn the house around us, he said. But he ain't scaring me."

PAT GOT up slowly. He set the pan of potatoes on the table and hitched his gun belts. "Brice," he said, "if you don't mind my saying so, I reckon you're going to have a man named Stevens for company this evening, and likely all night. That being the case, I better turn my horse into the corral."

"Be proud to have you stay. I'll sure need a man to help if the marshal backs up his boast with a posse."

Pat went out and pulled the saddle and bridle off his bay gelding. He turned him loose in the corral with the work team and came back.

Once more he sat in the straight-backed chair and took the pan of potatoes. "What do these lawmen look like?"

"The sheriff," Brice said. "He's husky, thick neck. I think they call him 'Bull' something."

"Bull Shard?"

"That's the name."

"That butchering timber wolf," Pat said. "I had him for a deputy under me a couple years ago. Had to fire him. Bull liked to carve up the prisoners too much. He'd beat 'em just for the fun of beating them—with the butt of his right-hand six-gun."

"He's on my side," Brice said. "It was him that guaranteed to me the title to my property here was good."

Pat shook his head slowly and slashed his knife across a spud. "I never heard such things before. Now this town marshal that's trying to get you to leave. Why's he doing that?"

"Because us Land Prophets that came out with permits from Washington to homestead around Dutch Springs find that there isn't any place for us as we were told by the government official in Pennsylvania. What land we expected to settle is grazing land and that's called open range out here and the cattle men have to have it to feed their cattle. So the wagons stay up the gulch and the mayor and his crowd threaten to burn them out if they don't move. I bought this ranch for my wife and I told the other Land Prophets they can bring their wagons and their families up here where nobody can touch them. A man's got a right to invite what friends he wants on his own property, ain't he?"

"I reckon so," Pat said. "So the town marshal, working for the mayor and his crowd, is coming out here to move you so the whole wagon train will have to leave."

"That's right," Brice said. "I'm certainly glad you come along when you did and talked me out of shooting you."

"Between you and me, I'm a mite glad myself." He dumped the peeled spuds in the boiling water on the stove. "And maybe you wouldn't mind telling me who signed the deed to this property?"

"Been trying to think of his name so I could tell you," Brice said. "As soon as we get supper finished and my wife settled for the night I'll get the deed and look up the name."

* * *

It was dark by the time they finished supper and Brice had his wife, Emma, quieted down for the night.

He came out of the bedroom nodding his head at Pat. "I knew the name was something like Kelly. It's Kelso. Harvey Kelso. He's a big landowner or something in town. Got a big land office next to the bank. Buys and sells real estate. He's been trying to keep the Land Prophets in the valley so he can sell them property to settle on, since they can't find homesteading land to prove up."

Pat's eyes were narrowed in disbelief. "Harvey Kelso a big land operator? Well, if he is, things have changed a mighty heap since I left. Harvey Kelso was—say, what's he look like?"

"About medium tall, kind of thin, quiet. Dark hair."

"That's Harv," Pat said. "Why, that little book bug was clerk of the records in the county safe when I left. He put down the sales and mortgages and deeds and things. A bookkeeper he was. And now you say—Brice, there's something mighty queer if he's jumped to being so wealthy and important."

"Everybody knows there's something crooked going on," Brice said. "The town marshal said so himself. He said they knew Kelso was getting the land some other way that couldn't be legal but they couldn't catch him at it. That was when he come up two days ago to tell me I didn't really own this property and I had to get off."

Pat had bent forward and was leaning with his elbows on his knees. He raised his hand for silence.

Brice nodded slowly. "Reckon it's starting," he whispered.

Pat rose quietly. Outside he could hear the soft clopping of horses' hoofs coming nearer.

Pat drew his left-hand gun, spun the cylinder and made a close inspection by the firelight. He slipped it back loosely in the holster, checked the right-hand gun, put that back.

"You got anything besides that scattergun, Brice?"

"That'll do for me. But I got a 33-30 carbine if you'd like to shoot it."

"How about ammunition?"

Brice's jaw set hard. "Enough to kill a hundred men if they're bunched close."

"You're a pretty murderous-sounding hombre for a psalm-singing saint, Brice."

"We don't just sing psalms, Stevens. We're farmers, mostly. We farm according to the teachings of the Good Book. Emma and me, we joined up from Maryland but mostly the Land Prophets are Pennsylvanians that sold rich farms they built up in Pennsylvania and they've come out with the money to settle on better land they can get for nothing. We're a thrifty lot."

"Sounds like it," Pat said. "And it sounds, too, like Harv Kelso was having a time among you Land Prophets like a steer in a new patch of alfalfa."

Brice nodded and lifted a carbine out of a dark corner. "See if that'll suit your shooting hands." He nodded to the fire. "Want the light out inside here?"

"It'd be a good idea," Pat said. "Make it harder to see us from outside if the fire was out."

BRICE went into the kitchen and came back with a bucket of water. He tossed it so that the liquid fanned out in a wide sheet to smother the fire. The water on the red embers hissed and popped and the light went out. Brice put the pail back and came into the darkened room. "Just because we got respect for the Lord don't mean that we'll lay down and let other folks tromp over us. Which side of the house do you want to watch, Stevens? Front or back?"

"It don't make any difference."

"I'll take the back where I can be close to my wife. Hope she don't wake up. I gave her some powders to make her sleep so whatever comes up shouldn't bother her too much." Brice got out the ammunition for the carbine.

"Just happened to think of something," Pat said. "I wouldn't try to kill any of these buzzards unless you have to. They may scare and if they do, that'll save you maybe getting mixed up in some trumped-up murder trouble."

"I'll scare 'em if they give me a chance," Brice said.

"One thing more, Brice. You say you can't remember the name of this town marshal, either?"

"It don't come to me," Brice said from the back room door. "But you'll see him if he comes leading this posse. He's big enough. And tonight there ain't no clouds and there's

a full moon. I been watching for this kind of weather tonight."

"You say the marshal is big, eh, Brice?"

"He'll be the biggest one in the posse."

"I can't wait to see him." Pat knelt before the front window and raised it a couple of inches.

The riders had reached a small clump of pine beyond the cottonwoods. They were leaving their horses bunched there and were stopping to plan.

There was shadow among the jack pines and Pat couldn't see any faces. One man in the middle was taller than the rest. Pat watched him for a time, but couldn't make him out.

He got up and moved to the other window in the front. He opened it a couple of inches, then went into the next room. This had been his and Sally's bedroom. Here, too there was a window facing the front of the house. Pat opened it a couple of inches and returned to the other room.

He checked the carbine by feel, made sure it was loaded and that the magazine was full. He knelt again, this time by the middle of the three windows and waited.

The knot of men in the pines began to move.

Brice called softly from the back room. "What's going on up front?"

"They're starting," Pat said. "They are coming now. Six of 'em. Two spreading out to the left, and two to the right. The leader and his buddy, they're coming straight on for the front door."

"That big one is leading, then?"

"Sure is. Can't get a look at his face till he comes out of the shade of the cottonwoods." Pat kept his voice down to a muffled rumble. "But I'll be able to make him out in a second or— Well, I'll be a bowlegged centipede."

"What is it?"

"That leader. Your town marshal is Dan Kenyon."

"That's it. That's the name. Kenyon."

"Why that weak-livered big hulk of blubber," Pat snorted. "He don't know enough to come in out of a cyclone."

"We'll scare him to death, then," Brice said, coming in.

"That's the trouble," Pat said. "He don't scare. Too damn dumb. He's honest as anybody can be, but he's been mixed up in more trouble because he'll believe anybody he's working for.

PAT HAD been watching through the slightly open window as he gave this information in a low voice. Now he stopped and moved the carbine through the window slot. He was taking aim with the carbine when Dan Kenyon's voice bellowed, "We're coming to clean you out, Brice. You and your woman. I got riders to clean you and burn down the house and barn before you get the rest of them Dirt Saints up here living with you."

The other man walking beside Kenyon, a small, wiry man whom Pat couldn't recognize, said, "We let 'em settle up here and we'll never get rid of 'em. They'll be running us off our own country pretty soon. Got to drive 'em out."

"We'll fix 'em," Kenyon said. He stopped fifty yards from the house, beside the wide trunk of the nearest cottonwood, and bellowed his command again, holding a gun in each hand. "Surrender in the name of the law."

"Reckon he heard that command down at the play they had in Hopewell Junction three years ago," Pat whispered to Brice. "Who's the wiry little squirt with Kenyon?"

"That's Dakin or Decker or something like that," Brice hissed. "Sort of a helper for the mayor."

"Looks like he's a gun slick, the way he carried his guns."

The wiry little man whipped out a six-gun and blasted at the house. Then they started closing in.

"Get to the back of the house again," Pat told Brice. "This ain't going to be any picnic. They get too close, shoot to kill. They won't scare easy."

Pat ran his eye along the sights and pulled the trigger of the carbine. The broad-brimmed hat on the big

man's head leaped and flew into the grass.

A barrage of shots came from the two. Simultaneously, the pair on the right began closing in fast, pausing only to fire.

Pat whipped out his six-guns, ran to the next window and blasted. He came back and set the carbine barking and again ran to the other window to blast there with six-guns.

The bellowing voice of Dan Kenyon called his men to a halt. "There's more than one inside there," he said. "Sounds like a half-dozen. Get down and come on slow."

Pat let go with the carbine as Kenyon stopped. He heard a cry from the big man. Kenyon dropped to the ground and lay still, cursing.

A wild burst of shots crashed through the window. Glass showered down on Pat and splinters flew in his face.

But worse than that, there were stars winking about him and they were nothing like the stars that hung low and bright in the clear Colorado night. These stars were flashing and explosive, and they faded, Pat felt himself settling to the floor, going lower and lower. Brice was saying something from the other room and there was gunfire. But it was faint and far away to Pat and of no importance now.

He was settling to the floor under the window and nothing else mattered. Blackness crept over him slowly, like a flood.

3

SOUTHWEST of Powder Valley, a rugged, swarthy little man sat his bay gelding and watched his giant, red-haired pal lead his long-legged roan as he moved slowly, with his one eye on the ground, along the jagged lava rocks at the edge of the Crater Lava Beds.

"You gone plumb loco, Ezra," the little man taunted. "Near a year ago you tracked Pat this far and lost him. Now you're coming back to go over the trail again."

"I ain't no such thing," Ezra said. "We're heading back to Powder Valley anyway, giving up our search for Pat along the border, and I'm checking my mistakes."

"You sure picked a good time for making mistakes."

"Shut up your flabby little mouth, Sam Sloan," Ezra growled. "I'm working on something important. I won't never sleep no more nights if I don't figure where I made my mistake."

"You can't tell nothing now."

"That's where you're loco," Ezra said. "I recollect exactly where I lost Pat's trail. I recollect it as if it was only yesterday. Anyway, day before yesterday. And I'm aiming to see what gave me the idea he was headed from the flow beds, to the border."

"Go ahead and look," Sam said. "It'll put off the time we get back to Powder Valley and the Lazy Mare. I don't hanker to get there sooner'n we have to—hearing about the gold strike and how the town and the valley has had hell raised with it."

"And with Pat still gone," Ezra said.

"Just because you didn't track him down and we didn't find nobody that had seen hide nor hair of him ain't saying he ain't maybe back there by now."

Ezra shook his head while his one eye still searched the rugged earth ahead of him. "Pat left by himself and I don't reckon he'll ever come back without us going after him and finding him."

"What makes you figure that way? Pat didn't never show signs of being that crazy. He'll come back some time."

"I know how he is better than you," Ezra said. "I always lived closer to him than you."

Sam's muscular little frame reared up in his saddle. "How you get to talk that way? We was together first time we ever laid eyes on him when

his Daddy showed him to us."

"But I'm more his kind," Ezra said "Quiet and smart, like. I understand him better."

"You big lunk-headed red-whiskered ape! You so close to him, why don't you find him, then?"

"I'm still looking," Ezra said. He worked on along the edge of the vast lava field. Suddenly, he stopped, pointing. "There," he said. "There's that six-ton hunk of lava shaped like a duck. I remembered that and the scratches on it where Pat's horse tromped over it when he left the Lazy Mare. Then I figured I saw another scratch right here on this rock, heading this way. And another one there."

Sam was following along, watching from his bay.

"Get close and look and you'll see I was right, in a way," Ezra said. "I figured there was a scratch on that rock and another on that one. I figured they was all fresh hoof-nail scratches but now you can see why I was wrong. Them others that I thought was scratch marks fresh in those rocks was some kind of white rock, like limestone or marble, molded right into them stones. Now look here."

Sam reined and got down. He bent as Ezra pointed.

"See there?" Ezra said. "That's the duck-shaped rock I recollect where I saw the last scratch." His voice choked up some. "That's the last thing we saw of Pat. That scratch that his horse's hoof made."

"I don't see no scratch," Sam said.

"Of course you don't. That's what I'm trying to tell you. The scratch I saw on that duck-shaped rock was fresh and made by a horse shoe and now it's weathered off. But these whitish marks I figured was scratched on the other rocks that pointed us to the border, them marks is still there. They're white rock I'm telling you. And so I'm showing you how I made the mistake in thinking he'd headed for the border. Look! There's a hundred yards, near, of them marks and after that I figured he struck the bed of that creek beyond and come out later on some rock that I never could find."

Sam took a deep breath. "You lost his trail. That's all it sizes up to, Ezra, any way you explain it."

"It's done," Ezra said. "And I'm mighty ashamed. But nothing to do now only go on back to Dutch Springs and see can we get another lead on where to look." He shook his great sun-bronzed head. "All that time we spent on the border." His voice was choked again.

HE MOUNTED his roan and reined to the northeast. The sun slanted across his scarred, weatherbeaten face and glinted on the redness of his whiskers and highlighted the jagged, white hash running diagonally across one eyelid and up over the temple into the hair. And the lid of that eye lay flat on his face while he stared wildly out of the other like a one-eyed giant of mythology. "I ain't never wasted so much of my life doing the wrong things."

Sam mounted his bay. "Anyway, it was safer than running with Pat and gettting into trouble," he said.

"Sure," Ezra nodded. "But trailing with Pat was always a heap more interesting than wandering around like a couple of lost rannies."

They rode on at a good single-foot gait.

"Ought to be in Dutch Springs, standing at that new saloon we heard was built and wetting down our parched throats in four hours or so," Sam said. "Ezra, I been thinking about Jeff Anson."

"I been thinking about him, too. We was in such a hurry we didn't wait to give him too good details about taking care of the ranch and the stock. I been worrying about him a heap."

"Sure hope nothing's happened to the Lazy Mare. Maybe we should've figured to come back earlier."

"We would have, long before this, if we hadn't kept getting descriptions of a gent that looked like Pat moving ahead of us."

They rode on for a long time in silence. The sun began to settle. Ahead of them, familiar peaks came into view. The men sat straighter in their saddles and their spurs worked now and then automatically,

touching their horses for a litle more speed.

"It's going to be good to get back," Sam said. "Won't be the same without Pat, but it'll be good."

He gigged his bay into a short trot and Ezra trailed him, staying close. They swung into the Hopewell Junction stage coach trail to Dutch Springs.

Things were familiar now. Far off, over the low hills, they could see the Culebra Range towering high. And under those mountains lay Powder Valley. They rode with eyes on the mountains, saying nothing, just watching the inviting scene.

The sun settled lower, and dropped behind the Culebras as they finally turned up into the lower end of Main Street.

Dutch Springs had changed. Where before a few cowhands used to be riding to or from the stores and the saloon, now there were miners in all kinds of clothes and hats and caps. Some were trudging from the mines to town and others going back. There seemed to be a fairly steady stream of men.

Sam pointed off along the base of the cliff to the south. "Ezra, that's what's made the change I reckon. See that gold mining sluiceway? And look at that hole partway up the side of the mountain with the slag trail coming down."

"I reckon they're making a heap of money off that hole now," Ezra said. "By the sight of the miners walking around they're doing a mighty healthy business."

The main street made a slight turn from the stage-coach trail. They peered through the constant dust cloud of the busy street, trying to see the new buildings.

"Look there," Ezra pointed. "That building on the right with the veranda roof coming out over the sidewalk, that must be the new saloon and gambling place we heard about down in border country." He licked his thick, parched lips. "Sam, how much money you got left of our winnings in that poker game in Los Alamos?"

"About a hundred and fifty," Sam said. "And it's going to stay in my money belt till we find out what kind of stakes they play for in the new house and who's running the games and the tables."

Ezra didn't argue. He reined his roan to the hitching rail that ran before the saloon. He sat looking up at the big gold sign over the porch. PALACE SALOON, he read. "Looks like about the biggest spread we struck since we lit out to tour the border."

Sam reined over beside him. He grinned a little and the effort made the dusty, dark-skin of his weathered face seem to crack in spots. "It'd sure be good to walk in and find Pat standing there at the bar, having a drink."

"Shut up your dreaming," Ezra growled. "And get down off that horse. I'm so thirsty, I could take a swig out of the Salt Lake and smack my 'dobe-cracked lips over it."

They got down and pushed through the batwing doors of the Palace Saloon.

Just inside, they stood for a while looking over the place.

To the right there was a stage, the curtains drawn across it now. A little group of reflectors masked the coal footlights at its foot.

The curtains looked heavy and rich. The gold in them gleamed bright in the brilliance of the many coal oil lamps that burned around the two chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

There were tables and chairs, and heavily rouged women in low-necked, short-skirted dresses were sitting at them with miners or cattlemen, moving about at the bar. But it was early yet and the saloon wasn't crowded.

EZRA AND SAM moved up to an open space near the end of the bar and ordered drinks. They tossed down two large ones without speaking or looking the place over any further.

Then Ezra turned. "Maybe it's this one eye of mine, but I ain't seen a soul I know since I came in here."

"It ain't your eye," Sam said. "I don't see anybody I know either."

They kept on looking around the saloon, turning their necks to the right and left.

"Never seen a place change so quick in my life," Ezra said. He was staring at a dark corner of the room.

Suddenly his one eye seemed to pop straight out from his head. He touched Sam. "Ain't that Charlie Anson, Jeff's father?"

Sam glanced toward the corner, nodded. "Charlie ain't changed a bit. Only thing I've seen that ain't changed since we come back."

"Let's go over and talk to him."

"That's what I say," Sam agreed. "Queer how a no-good liquor sop like Charlie could breed a fine, dependable youngster like Jeff. But I guess it ain't Charlie's fault he drinks. Had a woman that'd drive sixteen men to drink."

"You buy him a drink or two to loosen his tongue," Sam said. Ezra started over, and soon brought Charlie back by the arm.

Charlie was a little man, just past middle age and bent like a twisted cedar. He had running, red eyes and a sad, drooping mouth. He said, "How you, Sam? How you, Ezra? Where you been?"

They told him.

Charlie leaned heavily on the bar and rolled his eyes to the row of bottles in front of the big mirror and the painting of the nude woman. "I'll take whiskey," he said.

"Make it three," Sam called to the bartender. "Good to see you, Charlie. How's Jeff been doing running the Lazy Mare ranch while we been looking for Pat?"

But Charlie was concentrating on the bottle of whiskey the bartender had placed before them. He poured a shot, drained the glass in a skillful toss without spilling a drop outside his extended under lip. "Good for what ails you," he said.

Ezra poured another and they watched him toss that one off.

Charlie coughed and swallowed. "Well, I'll tell you," he said at last. "Jeff, he's a good boy. You know that. Mighty good boy. Best in the country. Jeff's my boy, you understand. Good boy." He coughed again. "Jeff ain't been on the Lazy Mare for months. Sold out and went to the western slope. A man out there was picking up some hands. Paying thirty-five dollars a month and found. Wasn't anything Jeff could do here, anyhow. Not with the good price Harv Kelso offered for the stock. Highest prices ever paid in these parts. So wasn't anything else to do."

"Hey, hold on here," Sam cut in. "What you talking, about Jeff selling out?"

"Just what I say. You told him to use his own judgment about buying and selling cattle. He said you left everything to him."

"That's right," Ezra said. "Course, we didn't figure on his selling out the whole heap of stock."

"You didn't say not," Charlie said. He eyed the bottle and Sam poured him another.

"What's Pat going to say when he comes back to the Lazy Mare and finds the stock gone?" Ezra asked.

"He's going to be mighty darn glad Jeff sold it," Charlie said, "when he ses the price he got for the horses and cattle. Money's all deposited in the bank in Pat Steven's name. Only he's got another surprise waiting when he comes back, I reckon,"

"What kind of surprise you talking about?" Ezra demanded.

"Ain't you heard? The place is full of miners and every other kind of human. And they got a flock of folks in wagons living up the gulch. Frank Dupree here, he's the mayor now, and owns this Palace Saloon and the dance hall next door and the gambling hall in the back. Frank and the boys is moving out this bunch with their psalm-singing and their wagons and their convertin' meetin's. They mighty near got me one night. Kept me from drinking liquor for three days last week. But then I couldn't see no sense in it, not when it was offered free. So now I just drink when somebody buys."

Sam grabbed the bottle and poured him another. The little man clutched the bar edge and tossed it off. He coughed, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and kept going.

"Got to get rid of these Dirt Saints, says Dupree. That's what they call these traveling farmers that farms according to the Good Book. We call 'em the Dirt Saints around here. Nice enough folks. Nice as anybody, they are. Nicer than some. Tend to their own business Tries to help folks. But they're a fightin' lot when

it comes to standin' up for their rights. But Dupree says, 'Got to clean 'em out. They keep coming ten, fifteen, twenty wagons a week. More and more.'"

Charlie glanced about, came close and lowered his voice. "His town marshal, Dan Kenyon, is working on one tonight. Hey, come to think of it, it's the Dirt Saint that bought Pat's ranch. I heard they went up there not so long ago. Dan Kenyon and a posse—to burn down the place and make 'em move. Seems the fella that bought Pat's ranch was inviting all the others up there until they could get settled on land they were supposed to get from the government."

EZRA AND Sam were staring at each other. Sam shoved some money across the bar. "Give him another one if he wants it," he said to the bartender.

They started for the batwing doors.

A big man with a heavy black beard shuffled in front of them. He caught Sam by one arm and Ezra by the other. "Wait, my friends," he said in a booming voice. "I wouldn't be in a hurry until—"

Ezra snapped his powerful hand over the big man's wrist. "What you got up your sleeve, Blackbeard? We're in a hurry."

The bearded man turned and shuffled along with them. "I'll tell you as you go—so nobody hears. Pat told me—not to tell anyone he was back—but I reckon—"

Sam stared at Ezra. "You hear what he said?"

Ezra was taking the bearded man's arm. He was hustling him outside. "You need air, amigo," Ezra said. "Or if you're telling the truth, maybe I'll kiss you when we get you outside."

"Ben," the man said. "Name's Ben Kelly. Like I say, Pat and I—"

"It beats the devil," Sam said. "One man you have to get drunk to make him talk and another you got to sober up so you can understand him. Come on, Ben Kelly. We'll walk the living hades out of you and you can start talking. Keep saying it till you make sense."

"I'm making sense," Kelly said but still thickly. "I tell you Pat Stevens and me, we come down all the way from desert country up in Ute territory. Him betting me that what I said about Dutch Springs changing wasn't true. And you know something?"

They stood alone in the alley beside the Palace Saloon. "What?" Sam said. "Talk faster. We ain't got much time."

"That son bet me fifty dollars just to have company to ride back to his ranch with. Didn't pay me all, though. Paid me about half. But he'll pay."

"Here," Sam said, and stuffed some bills in Kelly's hands "That enough?"

Kelly thumbed through the bills, held them up to the light that filtered through the crack of a window. "That's too much."

"Forget it. Now Pat's square with you. Now what's all this about his telling you not to mention he was here?"

"That's what he said." Kelly nodded. "He said, 'Don't tell nobody I'm back.' He was standing there with the gaunt gent holding a scattergun on him not letting him in his own house and he says—"

"He's up at the ranch now?" Ezra boomed.

"So far as I know. Dead or alive, I reckon he's there because I ain't seen him since I come down to the Springs to wet up a little."

Sam had turned to leave.

Ezra said, "Thanks, amigo. And if Pat didn't want you to mention him being back, don't you do it no more."

"I won't," Kelly said. "I sure won't. I wouldn't a done it this time, drunk as I am. Only I heard you talking about him and he'd been telling me about you two. I recognized you and figured you ought to know."

"We're sure grateful," Ezra said.

Sam had already untied their reins at the hitching rail. He mounted and Ezra forked up on his roan and they turned and dug spurs.

4

PAT STEVENS became aware of wild excitement about him. Brice was yelling, and Pat tried to coordinate his hearing so that he could understand. He opened his eyes and a flash swept and the darkness itself seemed to reel about him.

It was Brice shaking him. "Pat. Wake up. I can't hold them off much—" The sound of running feet and then the blast of one barrel of the scattergun mingled with the crack of a rifle.

Pat roused himself, got to his knees beside the window. Dust splintered in his face as a bullet tore through the side of the frame.

A form moved outside, running from the trunk of one cottonwood to another. He raised his right-hand gun and fired. The first shot was by instinct. The second was by quick aim.

The figure sprawled and seemed to lie still. Pat couldn't be sure whether he was dead or playing possum, but he had the feeling that comes to a man when he has made his shots tell.

Pat got to his feet to move to the other window. Something exploded in his head and he reeled, clutching the side of the wall for support. Then he was falling again, and the little wooden bookcase that Sally had had him make for her to hang on the wall was going down with him.

They crashed together and Pat lay there, trying to get his head straight. A loud thud sounded on the door and a light flared outside and quickly went out.

"They're trying to ram the back door," Brice bellowed.

Painfully Pat got his feet again, staggering toward the kitchen.

Brice collided with him and they wedged through the door into the kitchen. Pat fired through the back door, and there was silence outside. Brice stood behind the sink, waiting for a shot in return. But the silence continued.

Pat crouched behind the stove, guarding against a shot from outside. A shadow moved past the lower part of the window, and Pat blasted at it. There was no other sound.

Suddenly, there was a crash at the other side of the house and Pat spun round and headed for the front room again.

His head was throbbing with pain. He made the turn too quickly, and sprawled across the doorway and lay there. Brice was yelling at him again, a wild desperation in his voice. "We can't keep them out much longer."

"Don't tell 'em about it," Pat moaned. But his voice was scarcely more than an agonized breath.

All at once there was light. It flickered and grew brighter and Brice bellowed, "They're setting fire to—"

From down the valley came the sounds of gunfire and men shouting.

Pat lay there on the floor, trying to get up, trying to listen and comprehend all at the same time. He heard hoof beats and more shots and then talk outside and the sound of men running. A voice roared, "It's Kelso's men."

Another voice cried out, "He's likely sent the sheriff and his boys up to kick us out of here."

Pat struggled up again, slowly, carefully this time, to make sure of his balance. Brice passed him, running for the rear kitchen door. Pat saw him by the light of the growing flames. He was carrying a bucket.

Pat pulled himself up beside the sink and worked the pump. Water poured into a dishpan. He heard the yelling outside and the shooting and the running of horses.

Brice came in. "More water. Fire's on the back corner of the house. May save it." He slammed the pail into the sink and grabbed the dishpan full of water Pat had pumped.

Pat worked on the pail, his strength waning. Outside, horses galloped up. Someone yelled his name. It was Ezra's deep voice but there

wasn't time to pause for a formal welcome. The Lazy Mare was burning.

Brice called wearily for help with the fire. He came running in with the dishpan. "More water," he panted.

"Where's Pat?" It was Sam's voice, there in the kitchen.

Pat kept on pumping. "Right here, you dark-skinned little maverick. Strike a light and help me pump."

Ezra had come in behind Sam. He clapped his big hand on Pat's bent back and yelled, "Pat, you're a sight for this one eye of mine."

"No time for palaver," Pat barked. "Pump water and carry."

The flare of the kerosene light showed the wound on Pat's head "You're hurt," Sam said. "Get away from that pump and sit down in a chair till we get this fire out. Then—"

Pat swayed drunkenly away from the pump. He dropped into the chair and cradled his throbbing head in his hands.

EZRA AND Sam got busy pumping and carrying water. In a few minutes the glare of the flames dimmed and died out. It was then that Emma Price began calling for her husband.

Sam coming in to drop the last empty bucket on the kitchen floor jerked his head toward Brice hurrying to his wife's room. "Who's that?"

"That's the gent that owns this place now," Pat said.

"What?" Ezra's shout was a mixture of shock and disbelief.

Pat settled his head again. "Seems to have been a heap gone on here since I left. Where you two been?"

They told him. Then Ezra said, "I'll take a look at that head of yours, Pat. Might turn bad if it wasn't tended to."

"I'll tend to it," Sam said. "I'm better at doctoring than you."

"Who says so?"

Brice came back, looked at Pat. "Who are these? Friends of yours?"

"Best friends a man ever had," Pat said. "When they're sane and sober. How's your woman?"

"The fight upset her some, but I told her everything was all right."

"For now it is," Ezra said. "No telling when that pack of hyenas may come back again. Sam, you do a good job on that head of Pat's. It's the only one we got."

"Heat some water and stop shooting off your mouth, redhead," Sam snapped. "And you there." He looked at Brice. "If you got a razor I could sure use it to shave off some of Pat's hair around the wound."

Brice got him his razor.

"You'd better go outside and see if there's any of them left," Pat said. "I wouldn't want to leave any human lying out there wounded."

Ezra and Brice went out with a lantern. They came back in a few minutes. "Can't find anything but some signs of blood in the grass under the cottonwoods," Ezra reported. "Must a taken their casualties with 'em."

Sam was working with the hot water and some arnica around the bullet crease. He got Pat's head tied up in a clean dish towel and nodded. "You'll live."

"We'll get him to bed," Ezra said. He turned to Brice.

Brice led them to the front bedroom and struck a light. They folded down the blanket and rolled Pat in and blew out the light again.

* * *

Pat felt better next morning when he awoke. They spent it talking things over, catching up on what each had been doing and what each one had learned.

"We're mighty sorry about that Anson deal, Pat," Sam finished. "We sure wouldn't a left the place if we'd known things was going to turn out as they did."

"I kept telling Sam we shouldn't a left the place and gone off looking for you," Ezra said.

Sam turned on him. "You said? It was you made the mistakes, you redheaded ape. You was the one that said you could track him down and catch up to him."

"It's okay," Pat cut in. "I reckon nobody could have done any better." He turned to Luke Brice. "It seems

like the place is yours now, Brice, and I don't suppose things would have been much different either way."

Brice shook his head. "I feel a long way from right about it, even if it does seem I bought this fair and square. But I don't see what else I can do besides stay, with a sick wife on my hands and all."

"You're not going to do anything, Brice," Pat said. "You figured you bought this place and I'll be the last one to try to kick you off, specially with your wife the way she is. And maybe you got a full right to it. Harv Kelso knows the law. He ought to. He's kept books for the county long enough. The way I figure it, the first thing I got to do is face Kelso and find out what's been going on that I don't know about. I'm mighty eager to find out how come he got to be owner of this ranch without me saying I, yes, or howdy."

"Tomorrow!" Sam said. "You got a bad wound on the head and you need more strength to ride down then you got now."

"Today," Pat insisted. "I'm leaving after we eat this noon."

"That's right about now," Brice said. "I'll put on some water to boil for the potatoes."

"You might want to take a healthy swing at Kelso," Ezra reminded Pat. "Wouldn't want to give him a weak punch in the nose, would you? Better wait till tomorrow."

Pat turned and slammed his right fist into the potato sack in the corner. It didn't land very hard. Ezra laughed. "See, what did I tell you?"

PAT TOOK it easy the rest of that day, spending the time cleaning his guns and making sure they were in working order. He kept asking Ezra and Sam about their wanderings and about how Dutch Springs had changed.

"What was the idea of telling Ben Kelly not to let anybody know you was back in town?" Sam asked.

Pat shrugged. "Just a hunch. Never know when it might help to have somebody in town that folks didn't think was on your side."

"You ought to know that," Ezra snorted, "the way we've worked off and on, with Pat coming into a town and us acting as strangers."

Sam looked eagerly at the younger man. "You got a plan figured out for fighting this thing, Pat?"

Pat shook his head, made a painful face as the aching of his head became greater with the quick movement. "I don't know enough about what's going on yet."

"The way it looks to me," Brice said, "there's two factions fighting between themselves over the whole affair. And us Land Prophets is caught in the middle."

Pat nodded slowly. "It's a queer deal, I reckon. I don't know about this Frank Dupree that runs the Palace Saloon and dance hall setup. You say he's mayor?"

"He's mayor of the town and it's his side that's trying to kick out us Land Prophets," Luke Brice said.

"What kind of a man is he?" Pat asked.

"Mighty slick," Brice replied, "near as we can figure. He don't mind making his money on crooked gambling devices and such and we figure that's about the main story. He's afraid if enough of us get in here it'll put a stop to his stealing through his gambling machines and his bar from the miners and ranchers around about."

"I can figure that all right," Pat said. "But Harvey Kelso is the one that stumps me. Harv used to be a quiet little gent that kept his nose in the county books. That's all he was when I last recollect."

"Maybe," Sam said, "Harv learned a lot from keeping his nose like that."

"Or maybe he figured out some new ways of taking a ranch off an honest man," Ezra put in.

Pat got up and walked the length of the sitting room. He came back and stood looking out of the window with its frame splintered from the recent gun battle.

"I'm kind of eager to face Harv Kelso and see what he's got to say," Pat said.

"Tomorrow," Sam said. "It's too late in the day to start riding to Dutch Springs now."

Pat turned around, his square jaw set in his long face. "I'll wait till tomorrow, then, but no longer."

Next morning, Sam and Ezra tried to talk him into letting them go with him while Pat buckled on his gun belts. "No," Pat said. "This is my affair. Besides, I want to be alone riding into the Springs. You two better stay here in case this Frank Dupree or some other bossing hombre decides to come out and try another crack at burning down the Lazy Mare. And if anybody does come, you boys shoot to kill. This is getting past the playful stage, I reckon."

Outside in the corral, Luke Brice had saddled Pat's bay gelding and now he stood with the horse in front of the house as Pat came out.

"Stevens," he said, "I sure appreciate your taking my trouble like you have. I don't crave anybody's land and I aim to do what's right every way. If you need any help I can give, just call."

"Thanks." Pat mounted and reined down the creek trail toward Dutch Springs. And the sweat came out of his forehead and ran down his face for the sights that he saw brought back old memories of times that would never return.

THE THINKING took his mind off his own sorrow and he managed to straighten in the saddle and ride with head high and shoulders back. He nodded to Nat Wheeler coming up the trail and they reined to talk for a minute.

Nat said, "We sure been missing you since you gave up the sheriff job, Pat and left us." He wiped his tight mouth with his long, bronzed fingers. "We'd like mighty well to take you back tomorrow as sheriff but there's strong forces got control since you went away. And these Dirt Saints..." Nat's voice trailed off and he shook his shaggy head.

"What's wrong with the Dirt Saints?" Pat asked. "They sound too me like pretty good folks for the community."

Nat shrugged his bent shoulders. "I got nothing against them personal. Only we got enough folks in the valley without any more."

"I wouldn't rightly know," Pat said. No use arguing with Nat when he didn't understand the situation firsthand yet. One thing he did know, Nat Wheeler was a weak sort. He ran a scrawny little ranch up a dry gulch out of the valley and drank up most of what he made. Nat was the kind who would throw his vote on election day to the man who bought him the most drinks. Likely Frank Dupree had talked to him about the Land Prophets.

Pat left him and rode on down the trail. He could see the stale dust cloud hanging in the still, hot air above Dutch Springs and his mouth watered at the thought of a drink or two from the new bar. That would be a good way of circulating around and finding out first-hand about these things. But first there was Harv Kelso.

Even at a distance of two miles up the trail from where it hooked into Main Street, Pat could see the change. The street was lined still with two rows of weather-beaten frame buildings, but there were others, whose new lumber shone yellow and bright in the blinding light of the sun. The vacant lots were filled up here and there with the new buildings. Nothing much left along Main Street now for open space, except the alleys between the buildings.

He could see up several little side streets on his side of town. They stretched much farther, poking like grasping tentacles into the range country of the valley. And along those streets at the side of Main were large, ugly, yelow-looking hovels with flat roofs and yellow board sides, some covered with tarpaper and most with small windows, in rows.

Men dressed in the caps of gold miners lounged outside some of the buildings, seeking the shade of the over-hang, staying out of the sun, some playing cards and others just lounging and smoking.

Three blocks down two men began waving their arms and someone

yelled, "Fight!" Men from the early morning mine shift, or those that worked later on in the afternoon, or who were taking a day off, stirred, stretched and began moving down to where the two men were beginning to swing at each other.

Pat shook his head and swung his bay into Main Street. "Sure has changed," he remarked, unconsciously voicing his thoughts. "We used to have some good fights, now and then. But mostly they didn't start until the late afternoon."

A short, stocky man paused along the boardwalk, turned his back to the saddlery shop and stared at Pat riding by. "Hey, son," the man yelled. "You're sure speaking the truth."

Pat hadn't realized he had spoken so loud. He turned his head, and the man came running out in the street, holding his hand up to Pat. "Sure glad to see you back, Stevens. You spoke the truth. Things has changed a heap since you've been gone. But this time it'll take more than one man to bring 'em back to the good old ways."

Pat tried to remember the man's name. He'd worked around Dutch Springs and Powder Valley back before he'd left. Pat nodded. "Good to be back just the same, amigo." He rode on.

The hotel was still there where it had been. Bunting hung over the door as if they'd recently had some sort of celebration and had forgotten to take it down. The bunting was streaked with the red and blue running into the white.

To the left was the post office. He looked over at the Golden Eagle Saloon. He'd had some good times there and some trouble in the past, too. But the Golden Eagle Saloon now was different in shape and a sign over the front of the new yellow board building said: F. DUPREE FREIGHT COMPANY.

Pat shook his head and reined over toward the bank, the only building in town that anybody had taken time to build of brick. "That Frank Dupree must be quite a man or quite a skunk, one or the other." he said to himself.

He hitched his bay in front of the new wooden building next to the bank. The boards were still yellow with comparative newness, but they were planed smooth and were put on like the clapboards of a neat bungalow. There was a central entrance and flowers growing in the front yard. Old Charlie Anson was puttering around the flowers, pouring water on and hoeing a little.

A FACE LOOKED out of the front window. Pat saw a desk there by the window and the face was the bespectacled, small-featured face of the quiet county clerk of the records, Harvey Kelso.

Pat's eyes fastened on Harvey's as he got down. Harv smiled at him and waved a pale hand. He got up from his desk and went back into the other part of the building where Pat couldn't see him.

Charlie Anson watched Pat come up across the boardwalk, his watery, old, red eyes startled and hopeful, like the eyes of a man watching a fight or hoping one would start.

"Pat!" Charlie said. "Pat Stevens. Say, you back, no fooling? Let me touch you. Hey, things is going to pop now, eh, Pat? There's going to be fur and hair flying. Yes, sir. Fur and hair a-flying wide and high, eh, Pat?" Charlie rubbed his hands and licked his flabby lips.

"How are you, Charlie?" Pat said.

Been ailing. Have to keep taking my medicine regular." He winked, sobered. "Hey, I'm sorry about Jeff but you'll find he got a good price for your stock. You shouldn't be sorry."

"Forget it," Pat said.

"You going to try to get back your ranch from Harv Kelso?" Charlie whispered. "I heard he got it somehow and sold it again. You going to—"

"Don't get excited, Charlie," Pat said. He moved on toward the front door of the building, turned, and came back.

"You lost your nerve about facing him?" Charlie croaked. "You changed

your mind about going in to see Kelso?"

"Just for a second. Happens I'm broke for cash and if I got all that money in the bank you say your son put in my name I'll get some out. Always feel I got more backing with a dollar or two in my pocket. Besides, it'll do Kelso good to wait for me."

He walked to the boardwalk and down it, turned in at the bank and entered.

All of the faces inside the bank were new and strange. Pat stepped before a pale young man at the first window. "I'm Pat Stevens," he said. "How much money I got in this bank?"

The young man took his signature, carried the slip to some books and came back. He passed the slip through to Pat. On it was written a sum reaching to four figures. Pat's eyes widened. "Jeff got a good price for the stock at that," he said. He went to the desk and wrote a check for two hundred and cashed it.

With the cash in his pocket, he went out and walked around to the office next door. Now, before entering, he paused to read the various signs he had noticed earlier out front.

COUNTY CLERK

OFFICE OF COUNTY SHERIFF
Harvey Kelso, Real Estate
Ranches for Sale.

Harvey Kelso stood in the doorway waiting for him, smiling broadly. "You fooled me, Pat," he said. "I thought you were coming in a minute ago. Then you changed your mind and went to the bank."

Pat didn't answer. He stepped inside, brushed past the clerk's extended hand.

"It's good to see you back, Pat," Kelso said. He lost some of his smile. "We've missed you."

"It begins to look like I've missed you, too, Kelso."

"What do you mean?"

Pat ran his cold, gray eyes over the immaculate dress of the man before him. His slight figure took to dressy clothes. The Prince Albert coat fitted him well, the narrow waist showing that Harv Kelso had not taken on any weight in the middle.

The brocaded black vest was not too fancy. The flowing bow tie was not too flowing. In fact, Harvey Kelso dressed and acted like a gentleman of means.

KELSO SAT down at his desk and motioned Pat to a chair, but the lanky, young ex-sheriff remained standing. "I came," Pat said, "to find out how come you could take over my Lazy Mare ranch and sell it to Luke Brice while I was gone."

Harvey Kelso frowned, studied the clean blue blotter on the top of his heavy, oak desk. "Did I do that, Pat?"

"The deed to Luke Brice was signed by you. You don't look like the Harvey Kelso that used to keep county books, not with all that brocade and city clothing you're wearing. But it was your name on the deed and I reckon it's still your name."

Kelso rose. "I'll have to look it up," he said. "We have so many deals going through that I forget many of them." He got up and went into a back room. Pat could hear him ask someone about the records for the Lazy Mare ranch transfer. He came out with a girl Pat had never seen. She was carrying a big book and her finger was in an opening in the pages. She laid it on the desk and went back into the other room.

Kelso sat down and ran his finger over a column of handwriting on the left-hand page. "There," he said. "By George, you're right, Pat. I did get that ranch from you and sell it to Luke Brice."

"You must have got it from me while I was sleeping," Pat said. I'd sure like to see my signature on a deed, handing it over to you, Kelso."

Kelso closed the book and got up. "I'll have to look in the other records for that." He paused, studied Pat. "Let's see. You don't recollect ever deeding the Lazy Mare to me, is that it, Pat?"

"You know darn well it's right. And you know darn well how you

got it. I'm giving you just five minutes more to stop stalling and tell me how come you came by it."

"Five minutes is a very short time to check through our many records," Kelso said. "Just what do you propose to do if I don't happen to find it?"

"I'm going to take you by your skinny neck, and I'm going to twist you through that big window that you watch through like a spider laying for us flies."

Harvey Kelso smiled. "You wouldn't harm an unarmed man, would you, Pat?"

Pat felt his face turning crimson. His hands came up and his thumbs hooked in his gun belts.

"You've got a bad reputation in this town, Pat," Kelso said. "I wouldn't make any false moves if I didn't want to be thrown in jail. But if you'll wait until I can look it up, I'll tell you how I happened to get that little ranch you mention."

Harvey Kelso turned his back then and walked back into the other room.

Pat stood boiling with rage, his eyes strained on the door through which Kelso vanished.

Presently, Kelso came back, still smiling. "I'd forgotten," he said.

"There was a matter of back taxes that had been unpaid. The girl will bring the books for the past three years."

Pat raised his eyes to the same strange, sober girl who was carrying in three large record books. She spread them out on the desk and Kelso pointed as Pat watched.

"Tax for three years ago here in this column," Kelso said. "Unpaid. Taxes for two years ago on the Lazy Mare ranch, unpaid. Taxes for last year, unpaid."

"Maybe I didn't pay these last year taxes," Pat said. "I was away. But I know mighty good and well I paid the others. Anyhow, how come you to get it for taxes?"

"All property with delinquent taxes is sold at public auction," Kelso said. "You should know that. I recall buying in a lot of tax-delinquent property during the past year. Your Lazy Mare ranch must have been one of the properties." He closed the books. "I'm sorry, Pat. You'll have to watch your payments more carefully."

"I tell you I paid for those other two years," Pat said. "I can show you the—" He stopped suddenly, recalling the empty space under that loose board beside the fireplace at the Lazy Mare ranch. He'd kept his deed and receipts and all important papers in there. Now the box and everything it contained was gone.

Harvey Kelso was saying, "If I've made an error—that is, if I have made a mistake in recording and you can show your receipts for payment of those taxes during those two other years—I'll be more than glad to pay for your trouble and return the ranch to you, Pat."

Pat studied the wiry man before him. There was something deadly about his sureness. It suggested some mysterious power that Pat could not know.

Regardless, Pat said, "You know darn well I haven't got those receipts. What's more, you know who took 'em from where I had 'em hid on the Lazy Mare ranch. And you know you're lying, too, Kelso. Most of all, you know I'm going to run this thing down if it takes every penny I've got left and the rest of my life."

"You're in a bad spot, Pat," Kelso said. "You've made some wrong moves in the last few minutes. It's my duty to inform you, Pat Stevens, that you're under arrest."

5

STEVEN'S face twisted slightly as if he were going to smile. But he didn't even approach a smile, and when he spoke his voice was low and even and well-controlled. "Who do you think is going to arrest me and make it stick? You never were man enough to do that, Kelso."

Harvey Kelso nodded past Pat.

Pat turned. Two men stood blocking his way. The man on the right with a pair of drawn six-guns was the merciless, butchering Bull Shard, now sheriff under Harvey Kelso. The other was a new hand, with his guns hanging low. He looked carelessly sure of his drawing speed and aim.

Pat stalled for time to think and plan. "What's the charge for my arrest?" he asked, casually.

"You've threatened a county officer with bodily injury," Kelso said. "And you have charged said officer of the county with criminal and illegal practice. You have done all this before witnesses. You're in plenty of trouble, Pat."

Pat studied the two men before him while he listened to Kelso's words. His hands moved slightly nearer his own twin guns, then paused. There was a chance he might fall forward, draw and shoot all at the same time and make the move faster than Bull Shard could work his slow brain to make his trigger fingers pull. But that other gunman with Bull. He acted too sure of himself, as if he would enjoy coaxing Pat to shoot it out with him by sheer impudence.

Anyway, shooting it out wasn't the answer to this thing, Pat decided in the second mental run-over. Later, perhaps, there would be some gun fire and shooting, when the time came. But now it was a period for thinking and planning.

Kelso was saying, "Take Pat Stevens and lock him up, Sheriff. And see that he's locked up tight. He's always been a tricky character."

"You're the one that ought to know about tricky characters," Pat said wryly. "You and your land-grabbing, Kelso."

Bull Shard was laughing at Pat over his guns. He said, "Mr. Kelso, I reckon this is going to be fun. Pat here was the sheriff that fired me once as his deputy. Said I was too hard on prisoners. Pat's going to learn how we treat prisoners, ain't he, Mr. Kelso?"

Kelso was still smiling. "I imagine you'll learn some respect for officers of the law, Pat, before the boys are through."

Bull Shard came a step closer to Pat, nodded to his deputy. "Take his guns away, Paso."

"You're in a bad position, Pat," Kelso said. "I don't like to seem like a skunk altogether, though. I don't like to have to be nasty to you all around. A man is entitled to be sore when he runs into the bad luck that you have."

Paso took two steps toward Pat. He glanced at Bull Shard for further orders.

Bull roared at him. "Take away his guns, I said, while I hold him with mine."

"Wait, boys," Harvey Kelso said. "Let him go." He looked at the crimson face of Pat Stevens. "You're free to go, Pat. I just wanted to show you how things have changed since you left. You see, you're not running things around here any longer."

Pat gave his head a short nod. "Reckon it sure seems that way." He walked straight at Bull Shard—straight at his drawn guns and Bull moved out of his way as he came. Pat stepped outside to the boardwalk and turned right toward the new Palace Saloon.

Charlie Anson straightened up from his hoeing. "Find out anything, Pat?" His voice was a whisper.

Pat nodded. "Reckon so—the hard way." He walked on, cursing softly under his breath, and Anson followed after.

"I don't blame you for feeling like that, Pat," Charlie said. His red, watery old eyes gleamed. "I heard everything that was said and I ain't never listened to such humiliating talk, specially to somebody as big as you was once, Pat."

PAT FELT the back of his neck growing red with the anger and shame that had welled up in him. And yet he wasn't ashamed, really. It was more a sense of futility that he felt. He couldn't think straight and he couldn't remember when any man had outfoxed him so completely.

"You going to fight Harv Kelso?" Charlie urged.

"You're a fine one to be talking. You, Charlie. You're working for Harv Kelso."

"Sure, I work for Kelso if he pays me enough and buys me a bottle of liquor. And I clean out the Palace Saloon for Frank Dupree because he pays me good, too, and buys me liquor. And between the two I keep plenty comfortable and I can watch how this fight's shaping up between the two." He was almost running beside Pat's long-legged strides. "You going to gun fight Bull Shard and that gun ranny they call Paso. You going to draw on 'em when they get you mad enough?"

"I'm in no hurry," Pat said. "But whatever needs doing, I'll do it when the time comes."

Charlie chuckled and shook his head. "I know'd you'd stand up and fight. Anything I like is to see you in a fight. You're a heap of hell broke loose when you start throwing fists or guns, Pat. You're a heap of trouble when you get to fighting about something you think is right."

Pat kept striding toward the new Palace Saloon. He changed the subject, said, "What happened to the Golden Eagle Saloon, Charlie?"

Charlie chuckled. "Nobody knows, rightly. There's been talk that Frank Dupree, when he come to town, had it set fire to one night when he had all the boys from there, including Mort Freeman who was running it, over to the grand opening and free liquor party at the Palace. Later, Mort Freeman charged Frank with having his place set fire to and they come to gun drawing over it. I was there." Charlie said the last proudly.

Pat looked down at him. "Never saw anybody that liked to watch a fight better than you, Charlie."

"You're talking the truth there, son," Charlie said. "And that fight between Frank Dupree and Mort Freeman was fair as I ever see one. They went for their guns at the same time. Mort was slower but I know'd he could shoot straight enough if he got his gun up in time. Only Mort didn't throw it high enough. Frank had his gun out and spitting fire before Mort could get to squeezing his right-hand trigger. His left-hand gun never did get clear of the holster. Mort was a right-handed gun fighter, recollect. When he played poker he always had his right-hand gun on his belly ready for use."

"Where'd Frank Dupree get him?" Pat asked.

"Right through the heart. Fair and square and in the middle of his old ticker. Mort went down like a sack of corn and he didn't move a muscle after that. Course, folks said Frank done it all to get rid of the competition and maybe that's so. It sure looks like it." Charlie squinted up at Pat again. "You going to gun fight Bull Shard and maybe that Paso ranny they rung in here?"

Pat paused before the batwing doors of the Palace Saloon. He looked at the new doors, studied their ornate decorations. They were made of dark red mahogany with inlays of gold. On the left door was the initial *F* in old English lettering and on the right, in similar form, the letter *D*—Frank Dupree's initials in gold.

"Looks like Dupree figures to stay indefinite," Pat said, "putting his initials on his batwing doors like that."

"Frank means to stay all right. You'll see that the longer you stay here. He means to stay and run things his own way."

"How come you can work for both Dupree and Kelso and still keep talking about 'em out loud?" Pat asked.

Charlie shrugged and grinned. "Reckon they both like to have a harmless old geezer like me bragging on 'em and what they do. Hey, Pat. You going to gun fight Bull and that Paso? Cause if you are, I want to warn you. That Bull, he's slow as molasses in winter time. But that Paso. I've seen him draw and shave a man's ear before the other man could touch his gun butts. You want to be ready to do better than you ever done before if you draw with him."

"Thanks," Pat said. He started walking again, through the swinging doors, and Charlie walked beside him, licking his lips.

"And will you let me know when

you're fixing to gun fight them too?" Charlie persisted. "I sure want to be there to see that."

"I'll buy you a drink now," Pat offered, leading him to the bar. "What'll you have, Charlie?"

"Whiskey," the little man said happily.

Two bartenders were working behind the bar. One was sleek-looking and thin with an easy smile and a clipped mustache, the other a thick-set, poker-faced man with hair parted in the middle and the cowlick slicked back on either side and plastered with bear grease. He had a flowing mustache that drooped on either side almost to the square sides of his jaw. It was this one that came to wait on them.

"Two double whiskeys," Pat said. "Set out the bottle." He nodded to old Charlie and the little man poured the amber fluid into his glass, steadying his shaky right hand with his left, trying not to spill a drop.

Pat poured himself a full glass and they tossed them off. He turned and studied the big, ornate room while Charlie poured himself a second.

FRANK Dupree's saloon was larger than most Pat had ever been in. The bar ran the full length of the building to the right of the entrance. Opposite the bar, on the wide wall, hung a huge stuffed wapiti head, the antlers seven feet wide. Under it a double door opened into a dance hall with bunting hung from the ceiling and draped. A fiddler was playing, and miners and a few cowhands were dancing with the girls that Frank Dupree had imported.

"Drink up," Charlie said.

Pat poured another, tossed it off and, turning, studied the rest of the Palace Saloon interior while Charlie poured himself two more and downed them like water.

"Back there's the gambling rooms," Charlie said, nodding across the tables and chairs to the wide door that opened at the back of the saloon. "Me, I got to be getting back to my gardening." He lowered his voice. "Don't forget to let me know when you're going to start the shooting, Pat."

Charlie went out through the swinging doors without getting his answer.

The trade was light in the Palace Saloon. The music stopped in the dance hall and the few miners and cowhands, and their girls, came into the saloon proper and sat down at tables to have drinks.

Pat looked them over. There wasn't anyone he had ever seen before. It made him feel lonely in his own town.

He drifted toward the gambling room at the back and stood in the doorway to watch the players at the roulette table. A miner had a small stack before him. A rancher with a wide-brimmed hat was playing from the end of the table—playing on the black and losing.

A second miner entered from the bar and stacked chips at the other end. Then a young man came in wearing a narrow-brimmed black hat, the crown undented, as an easterner would wear it.

The young man was tall and broad in the shoulders, and a frightened look sat strangely on his weathered face. He wore a black suit of clothes that was strictly eastern and for Sunday use.

Pat eyed him closely. And then, his mind made up, he walked over to the roulette table and nodded at the wheel. "I want to gamble," he said, and his mouth closed so that his lips formed a hard, straight line of pale flesh.

"Go get yourself some chips from the barkeep," the dealer said.

The young man went out.

The dealer laughed. "One of the Dirt Saints sneaked in to gamble," he said. "This is going to be funny."

The only other dealer in the quiet gambling room was the faro dealer. He nodded to Pat and riffled the cards in his hand. "Care to try your luck, friend?"

"Thanks," Pat said. "I'm watching today."

"Make yourself a fortune with the turn of a card," the faro bank dealer said.

Pat watched the young Dirt Saint

come back in. The young man glanced about the room as if he feared being watched. His gaze rested on Pat—hesitated a moment with those steady, clear, gray eyes upon him.

Pat glanced away, rolled and lighted a cigarette with studied carelessness, and watched intently the smoke curling upward. Then he looked for the Dirt Saint again.

The young man was at the roulette table studying the markings and colors and numbers. Holding a small stack of chips in his hand, he watched the wheel spin and tried to follow the little ivory ball as it leaped and rolled and dropped into a black number.

The miner let out a whoop and called for a drink. The dealer pushed a stack of chips at him.

The miner took his winnings and went out. The young Dirt Saint licked his lips and his eyes sparkled as he watched the miner leave.

The dealer eyed the prophet. "Care to try your luck, sonny?"

The Dirt Saint looked behind him, back into the saloon, as if he must first make sure no one was watching. He turned again to the table and nodded. "I reckon so." He was trying to sound like a westerner but his eastern, nasal twang gave him away as a tenderfoot.

The rancher looked him over not unkindly. "You don't belong here, son," he said. "Better go back to your tent wagons and your psalm-singing before you get hurt."

"I got my own money and I earned it fair," the young man said. "I got a right to do with it what I like."

PAT WAS standing beside the Dirt Saint now. "My name's Pat Stevens. What's yours?"

"Adam," the young man said. "Adam Bates." The color was rising into his tanned cheeks. "But you ain't going to talk me out of trying my luck if I want to."

"I ain't going to try to stop you," Pat said. "Quickest way to learn a lesson is to burn your own fingers. I figured maybe you'd like to know how the game worked."

Adam Bates hesitated.

Pat explained roulette to him, the odds and chances and methods of betting by laying your chips on your choice.

"Thanks," Adam said. He turned his back on Pat, laid one chip on the red and gave his head a decisive nod.

The wheel spun and the ball leaped. It stopped on a red square and the dealer pushed a chip over to Adam. His eyes shone. The dealer winked at Pat.

They placed bets again, Adam and the rancher. They both lost. They bet again.

Over at the side of the gambling room, a door flew open suddenly and a man's voice drowned out the clicking of the leaping little ivory ball. The man was tall, well-built, dressed like a top gambler. He looked to be over forty but how much more was difficult to tell. His Prince Albert coat tails were flying as he flung open the door of his office. His fine-featured face was dark and angry.

"Get out, Maggie McCabe, and don't ever cross me again or I'll kill you."

The woman was flashily dressed, medium small. Her aging face was heavily rouged. Her eyes were wild.

"I'll see you in hell yet," she said. "You're forgetting everything I did for you back in border days. And now you won't even give me a job singing in your dance hall. Why you low, forgetting skunk. If I was to tell the things I know about you—"

The man's hand was wide and sweeping through the stale smoke of the gambling room. The slaps of his hand against her face, brushing hard back and forth, cracked through the room.

Adam Bates seemed to forget the roulette wheel and his bet. He turned and charged the gambler with his big fists clenched. "Stop beating a woman," Adam yelled. "Stop beating her, or I'll—"

The gambler shot a quick glance at him. Then he threw his Sunday punch It caught Maggie McCabe on the chin, and the force of the blow hurled her halfway across the room to crash in the corner.

"Who says so?" the gambler barked.

"I say so," Adam Bates barked back at him.

Pat was coming in to help. He saw Adam flail out with a long right arm and connect—saw the gambler go for his belly gun.

"Don't draw," Pat yelled. "Don't draw on that unarmed kid, or I'll kill you as sure as there's a devil in hell."

The gambler froze with his gun hand about to draw. Pat had his guns half out of their holsters. Now he dropped them back again.

Adam connected with his right and the gambler half-spun, screamed an oath and tried to keep from going down.

Young Bates let go a flailing left. It connected, and the gambler fell heavily to the floor inside his office.

Pat caught Bates and spun him around. "Get out of here, kid, while you're healthy. You're all right but—"

"Nobody can hit a woman, you hear?" Adam said. "Not while I'm—"

"I know," Pat said. "And you done good. But get out while you can." He rushed him to a back door off the gambling room.

The faro bank dealer, a stocky man with powerful arms, leaped to block the door.

Pat rushed him and swung. As the dealer tried to counter, Pat managed to push the Bates kid out of the door and slam it shut.

"What are you in this fight for, Stevens?" the faro dealer demanded. "You standing up for the Dirt Saints?"

"I'm standing against anybody that starts beating up a woman," Pat said. "And I'm standing up for a kid like that one that's got good principle behind him."

Something in the shift of the dealer's eyes had made Pat suspect what was going on behind him. He spun round as the gambler who had slapped and beaten Maggie McCabe came at him.

The gambler's belly gun was drawn. He was bringing it up to shoot. In a second the muzzle would be aimed at Pat and the tight finger on the trigger would be squeezing and a slug would be tearing at Pat Stevens' heart.

6

THERE was no time to draw his own guns. There was only one wild chance, and Pat took it. As the other's weapon exploded, Pat dived sidewise out of the line of fire, his left foot kicking high as he went down.

A bullet tore through his sleeve, and then his foot connected with the shooting hand of the gambler.

There was a savage oath—a cry of pain.

The smoking gun spiraled into the air in a wide arc, crashed against the faro table, slid to the floor.

As the gambler grabbed at the injured arm for an instant, Pat leaped to his feet, then his opponent closed in, and Pat swung. They battled, throwing fists wild.

The gambler's face was white now, and he cursed softly in low mumblings as he threw his punches.

Pat was taller than the gambler and rangier. He had the reach but not the boxing skill that the gambler seemed to possess.

A right caught Pat full on the chin, and the room spun and cleared again as another came in. Somehow he managed to keep his balance and threw a wild right and a short left. The gambler fell back and Pat followed him.

Out of nowhere a fist came crashing into Pat's face, then another. He managed to duck under the second and came in swinging again at close range.

The gambler staggered, caught hold of the door casing, grabbed for his belly gun that wasn't there. As Pat came swinging in to finish him off, he cowered, trying vainly to cover up.

Something brutally fast and heavy

struck Pat from behind. It was as if two big men had jumped on his back at the same time. He felt himself going down, falling forward with nothing to stop him but his outstretched hands.

The crushing weight carried him down and his face struck the hard boards of the floor. The wind went out of him and he lay there trying to gasp for breath.

Half-conscious, he recognized the voice of the heavy bartender with the flowing mustache. He was saying "We'll fix him for you, boss. We'll fix him so you can beat off his head and it'll be a pleasure."

Pat was trying to wriggle out from that great weight on him. The big bartender was on him and possibly the stocky faro bank dealer too. It felt as if they both had their knees in his back.

Suddenly, the weight was lifted. He tried to get breath but he had only a moment. He was yanked upright from behind and his arms were pinned behind his back and held there.

He half-hung, half-stood with his head leaning forward.

The gambler's face and white shirt were bloody, but he was trying to laugh. He said, "So you're this Stevens I've heard mention of." He swung his left as a trial blow. It landed and Pat's head wobbled.

"And I heard some say that if you ever came back you'd be running the town again," the gambler said. "So I'm going to teach you who's going to be the boss of Dutch Springs from now on."

The gambler hit Pat with a right and then a left. He slapped Pat's face while miners came in to laugh at the show.

A right fist loomed before Pat and landed full between the eyes and another smashed his mouth. The blood taste in his mouth was salty and the pain was intense.

"I'll show you who runs things here now," the gambler said. "I'll beat you until you'll never have nerve enough to lift a finger against me again. Who do you think you are, coming around telling me I can't take a poke at a woman if I feel like it?"

Another fist crashed into Pat's face, and another.

The gambler's words weren't making much sense now. The room and leering faces and waving fists were all combining into a kind of wild, nightmarish confusion that had no beginning and a doubtful end.

The light began to fade after a time. Then there were other voices—voices, Pat thought, of high pitch, as if women or one woman was screaming. But nothing much mattered. He was hanging painfully from the arms that held him up, hanging and taking the beating of his life with no chance to fight back.

* * *

THE FIRST thing he heard was the voice of a woman, and he would have tried to open his eyes, but they seemed to be swollen shut.

He waited, trying to relax, to give his head a chance to clear more completely, and listened to the voice flowing on above or about him.

"....the first time," the voice was saying. "First time any man ever stood up for me—like I was a lady."

He could hear the voice waver, in soft weeping.

There was a strange odor filling his nostrils. It was not strong, and he thought of perfume. There WAS perfume, also. And something else. The perfume that this woman wore and something else.

He licked his lips—heard a gasp from the woman who apparently was beside him.

"You're going to be all right, Mr. Stevens," she said. "You won't be marked much. Not when your face heals, you won't."

He tried to open his eyes again so that he could look at her. She'd probably be the McCabe woman the gambler had slapped around. But that other smell. It made him think of eating time and he tried to connect it directly to that.

He licked his lips again and there was taste along with the smell. The taste was of raw steak and the steak was on his swollen eyes and that was the reason he couldn't open his eyes and see. The slab of steak was cover-

ing his eyes so he couldn't open them.

"You're going to be all right," she said.

Pat spoke through swollen lips. "Did the Dirt Saint get gone all right?"

"I don't know what you mean," the woman said.

"Forget it," Pat said.

"One thing," the woman's voice went on. "I want you to know how I appreciate you standing up for me and fighting over me when Dupree was beating me."

"So that was Dupree," Pat said.

"That was Frank Dupree," she said. "The lowest skunk that ever dealt a card. And I'm sure grateful to you for taking my part."

Pat didn't answer.

"And you know something?" the woman said. "I got a notion you and me would get on good together."

"Don't be making any wild guesses," Pat said. "As far as my part in the fight is concerned, I reckon I'd have done it for any woman that a man took a poke at."

There was silence for an instant, broken only by the sudden catch of the woman's breath.

Then fury broke loose. She snatched the steak from his eyes and, catching hold of his shirt front, jerked him up to a sitting position. She was strong, too, and the wide-planned slap in the face that she gave him sent his brain to jiggling again and made his eyes dance. And the blow let him know just how sore his beaten face was.

The woman was Maggie McCabe all right. She was pretty, in a loud sort of way. Pat guessed that she had been beautiful earlier in her life.

She was standing, staring down at him, and her fingers, hanging beside her ample hips, were trembling a little. Her chin was quivering, too, and she looked as if her emotions might get the better of her again.

"After I had the boys drag you up to my hotel room so I could take care of your beat-up face," she said, "then you go and insult me."

"I don't never mean to insult any woman," Pat said. "And I sure thank you for taking care of me."

He looked about the room. It was one of the bare rooms of the old Dutch Springs Hotel. A light was lit and standing on the dresser. The flame was beginning to smoke the globe some.

Maggie noticed his gaze. She went over and turned the wick down. "I ain't a bad housekeeper," she said. "Even if I have been a dance hall singer and dancer."

SOMEONE pounded on the door of the room and Maggie scowled and turned. She opened the door and little Charlie Anson came swaying in. Charlie searched the room with his red eyes, focused them on Pat sitting on the bed and steadied himself while he waited for the vision to clear in sharper focus.

"There you be, Pat," he said. "Hey, how you feeling? I heard about the fight and I come over. Why didn't you let me know you was going to fight Dupree? Hey, you tackled a tough one there in Dupree. I told you about him shooting—"

"State your business and get out," Maggie said bluntly. "Your friend, Pat Stevens, is a sick man. He's going to need a lot of care before he's all well."

"Oh, I'm all right," Pat said. He slid his legs off the bed and stood up. The room swam. He felt himself going down and then he hit the bed and lay there.

Charlie Anson and Maggie McCabe were arguing. Maggie was saying, "So you don't think I'm fit to take care of him. Well the fight was over me, see? I'm staying in the next room, and looking after him every so often to get that swelling down in his face. Now you get on out of here, whatever your name is and—"

"Don't tell me," Charlie said. "I come over to tell Pat that he's got himself in bad now, worse than ever. I come to tell him he tackled a bad actor in Frank Dupree."

"I'll tell him myself," Maggie snapped. "I know Frank Dupree a lot better than you do. Now go on out before I throw you out."

Little old Charlie Anson ran his

watery eyes over the ample arms and shoulders of Maggie McCabe. She was husky enough even if she wasn't too big. And the huskiness was mostly muscle. She made a threatening move at him and Charlie backed away.

"Yes, ma'am," Charlie said. He went out and closed the door behind him.

"There," Maggie said. "Now you lie down again and I'll put the steak back on and take down the puffing so by morning nobody'll know you've been hit in the eyes anyway." She pushed him backward and he lay still while she ministered to his battered face.

She had his face covered in no time. "Now you try to get some sleep," she said, "and I'll go into the next room I rented and try to do the same. If you want anything, pound on the wall with your fist."

* * *

Pat was awakened by someone else pounding—pounding on the door of his room. He sat up quickly, shaking the poultices off his face. As he reached for his guns in their holsters on the chair he yelled, "Come in!"

Someone rattled the door, but it didn't open, and then Maggie's voice screamed from up the hall, "What are you two buzzards doing trying to get in that room this early in the morning?"

There was some muffled talk outside and then a slightly mollified Maggie saying, "Well, how do I know you're friends of his? I locked him in so I could be sure of who was going in and out."

"It's all right, Maggie," Pat called. "Let them in."

"If you say so," she said, and turned the key in the lock.

SAM'S SWARTHY face appeared in the doorway, Ezra's one eye peering over the smaller man's shoulder. They hurried to Pat's bedside.

"You all right?"

"All right, Sam, except for being a little bent up here and there," Pat said.

"We been worried plumb loco," Ezra put in. "We only just get you back and then you go out and stay all night."

"I'm not used to staying out all night alone, I'll admit," Pat said. "But I try to take care of myself."

"From the looks of you," Sam said, "you didn't try hard enough."

"How come you two aren't out at the Lazy Mare, watching over the place and Luke Brice and his woman in case the town marshal comes back in force? He'll burn that house down yet if it's left to you to stop him."

"How you think we can stay there with you out all night?" Sam demanded.

"Don't believe it was all you," Ezra said. "Sam got thirsty and I got to worrying about you, Pat, and between us, we come down to find out what was going on."

"You came a little late," Maggie said, leaning against the door frame and viewing the scene from there. "And now if you gents are through visiting, you might go back where you came from and let Pat rest."

"We don't go without taking him with us," Sam said. He jerked his head toward Maggie. "Who's this painted cactus, Pat?"

Maggie's face went crimson. "Why you skin-burned little buzzard," she screamed. "Who you calling a painted cactus? Let me tell you something. You were old and getting wrinkles when I was still a little girl in short dresses."

"Treat the lady with respect," Pat said. "She's a friend of mine." He glanced at her, saw the sudden straightness of her and the pride in her carriage and sparkle in her eyes. "Fact is, Frank Dupree and I were fighting over her when I got this fist-peppering."

Ezra squinted hard at Maggie, shrugged his big shoulders.

Sam bowed low. "Scuse me," he said sarcastically.

"This is Maggie McCabe," Pat said. "Sam Sloan and Ezra. Two pals of mine, Maggie. They don't mean no harm than a bull buffalo and a wildcat."

Sam still looked at Maggie suspiciously but Ezra gave his big, grotesque head short nod and said,

"Pleased to meet yuh."

"Maggie's been nursing me here since the fight last night."

"It wasn't any fight," Maggie said. "It was a slaughter. The bartender and the faro dealer held Pat's arms behind him while Dupree beat the head off him."

"We heard about it at the Palace Saloon early this morning," Sam said.

"And that ain't all we heard," Ezra added.

"You're getting Pat excited and he needs rest," Maggie interrupted. "You never saw anybody take such a beating."

"Don't worry about the town marshal coming back for more," Sam said. "We heard he got shot up pretty bad at the Lazy Mare. And they don't know if that little squirt, Decker or Dakin or whatever his name is, will live."

"That's too bad," Pat said. "What else did you hear?"

"Nothing more that's funny," Sam said. He lowered his voice. "How about this woman? Can we trust her?"

Pat nodded. "I reckon we're all in about the same boat so far as Frank Dupree is concerned. I wouldn't wonder if Maggie can be trusted."

"Don't worry about me," Maggie said. "I hate Frank Dupree worse than any of you—maybe worse than anybody. Don't worry about anything you say getting back to him."

"What else did you hear?" Pat asked. "And how straight is it?"

"Remember Ben Kelly, the man you rode over the Culebras with?" Sam asked, watching Pat's puffed face. "Well, seems Ben ain't forgot that you don't want him to tell about knowing you. He's carrying it on like that right along. This morning he come down to the bar where we was having a drink and he says, 'Gents, I just overheard some news you ought to know.' Then he told us how you'd got in the fight and how you'd come out."

"He didn't tell us nothing about that," Ezra put in. "We already know'd that. We'd heard everybody talking about that. Seems the miners and a lot of the boys thinks you got a bad deal there, Pat. They're kind of shaping up against this Dupree for it."

"Stop interrupting me, you one-eyed redhead," Sam bellowed. "We got to tell Pat the important thing before it's too late."

"Go ahead and tell him," Ezra said. "What you stalling around for? Tell him Dupree's going to get him and—"

"Shut up, so I can tell him straight," Sam snapped. He turned to Pat. "Ben Kelly said he overheard that Dupree is going to send some of his gun fighters after you this morning or today some time, after you get out of the hotel."

"And that ain't all," Ezra went on. He lowered his voice, shot his bulging one eye like a headlight and beamed it on Maggie McCabe's face. "We heard that Dupree is going to get Maggie, too, soon as things shape up right."

"Soon as what shapes up right?" Maggie said. Her voice was just as steady, but her face had gone pale even under her rouge.

"Near as I could figure," Sam said, "this Harvey Kelso, the clerk, is opposing Frank Dupree and his men. And I believe Dupree's waiting till maybe things quiet down a little and Harv Kelso and Bull Shard and his men stop watching so close."

"But you're his main concern, Pat," Ezra said. "Dupree's men are going to gut shoot you or gun you in the back or whatever way is easiest when he figures he'll be safe from a murder charge."

7

PAT Stevens glanced at Maggie's white face. She was trying to laugh it off. "That's just gossip you heard," she said. "I know Frank Dupree. He wouldn't talk about it ahead of time if he was going to gun for Pat or me."

"He might be trying to scare you

two out of town," Sam said.

Maggie looked at Pat. They considered it in a quick glance and Pat said, "That's a smart idea you got there, Sam. And I hope you're right. But I'm not so sure." He glanced at Ezra. "What about this gut shooting and back gunning you say you overheard? Is that what somebody said that knew what they was talking about?"

Ezra's one eye shifted uncomfortably. "Well now, I—"

"Ezra laid that one on a little," Sam said. "I don't recollect hearing anything like that, not word for word, anyway."

Maggie turned on him. "Is that true, too, about Dupree gunning for me when he gets a clear way?"

Ezra shook his head. "We heard that part. Some of his gun fighters were talking about it along the bar."

"That part about gunning for you and Pat was true enough," Sam said. "But like I say, I guess Ezra laid it on about the back and gut work. Anyhow, we figured it'd take all we could figure up in good stories to make you take the necessary precautions, Pat."

"He can take care of himself," Maggie said, proudly, "except when a couple of monkeys hogtie his arms behind him so Dupree can punch off his head."

"I've seen times when we came in handy," Ezra said, grudgingly.

"Well, he isn't scaring me," Maggie said. "He's slapped me around almost as long as I've known him and that's long. And he's threatened to gun me down several times when we get fighting. But he's never lifted a gun out of his holster to me and he never will."

"What makes you think he won't?" Pat had swung his legs off the bed and was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees.

"Because there's a kid brother of mine that's been looking for Frank Dupree ever since Frank put me in the hospital for six months and ran out on me a number of years ago. Denny can outdraw and outshoot Frank Dupree any day in the week and if he was to get word that I'd been shot, he'd have a hunch that I'd found Frank and Frank had done it. And from then on Frank's life wouldn't be worth a rotten buffalo hide."

"That's part of the story of Frank Dupree's past that you were saying you might tell about him when he threw you out of his office?" Pat asked, casually.

Maggie's eyes flashed. "I'm not squealing on anything Frank did in the past. No, that wasn't it. I could hang Frank for what he's done in the past, but I'm no squealer."

"But you kind of take a hankering to him that won't wear off?" Sam said. "Is that what brings you back?"

Maggie hesitated. "Not on your life!" Her eyes were suddenly blazing again. "Nobody with any sense would let that man get a hold on her. I only happened in town, heard he was running things and being down on my luck, asked him for a job singing in his new layout."

"What'd he throw you out for?" Sam demanded, bluntly.

"The lady don't have to answer such personal questions," Ezra said.

"Leave her alone," Pat ordered. "She's been mighty good to me. Got more than half of the swelling down. Got me so I can move around and look halfway like a human being again."

But Sam didn't give in. "Don't let a woman fool you, Pat. Bet she just set her trap for you like you was a mouse. If it was a funny-looking little geezer like me, Maggie, I bet you wouldn't have bothered to get so worked up like with a tall, handsome ranny like Pat."

Maggie went for him with her teeth and nails bared. Sam ducked behind Ezra and she chased him around the big, one-eyed giant, whirling Ezra around and screaming, "I'll get you, you dark-skinned little runt. I'll scratch your tongue out, saying things like that about me. I'll show you I'm a lady."

"Hey, you three," Pat cut in. "I'm supposed to be a sick gent with a head that shouldn't be dizzied. Now cut it out and Sam, you apologize to the lady."

Ezra had caught her by the shoulders and held her at the ends of his long arms, struggling.

"If I ever seen a lady, you're it," Sam said. "Now you satisfied?"

MAGGIE stood puffing for breath. "Now like I said when you came in, get on out of here and don't be bothering Pat until he's fit to go out and take care of himself. And don't worry about him while he's here. Dupree wouldn't dare send his boys into the hotel to gun him. Be too much evidence against it, like seeing the gun fighters come in and leave. Now go on. Get out of here."

Ezra and Sam glanced at Pat sitting on the edge of the bed. There was uncertainty in their eyes. Ezra said, "We'll do whatever you say, Pat. You want we should let you get some more rest, we'll go."

"Maybe first we should tell him what else we heard—about that Dirt Saint the fellers was talking about in the bar early this morning," Sam said.

"What Dirt Saint?" Pat was sitting straight now, his head cocked in sudden interest. "What was his name?"

"I figured it was somebody had to do with the fight you got in, Pat," Ezra said. "What was his name, Sam? Abraham or Isaac or something like that."

"You got your Bible names mixed," Sam said. "It wasn't any of them. But his last name, it sounded like Dates or Gates or something like that."

"Adam?" Pat said. "Was that his first name? And his last was Bates? Adam Bates?"

"That's right," Sam nodded. "Adam Bates."

"What about him?" Pat asked.

"Dupree's sure gunning for him," Ezra said. "Folks around the bar said Dupree was planning to go face him right in the wagon camp circle with his town marshal there so's it would all look nice and legal."

"Only he can't do that right off," Ezra said, "on account of Dan Kenyon, Dupree's town marshal, is bad shot up and can't go with him till he gets better."

Pat eased back his shoulders. He moved his legs to make sure they would work well enough. He moved his arms next, stretching them and lowering them to his sides, where his guns would be. Then, he rose slowly from the edge of the bed.

There was no trouble in standing. He felt a little dizzy for a moment but that was from the upward movement of his battered head.

"That could cause a heap of trouble right off," he said. "It'll bring things to a head if Dupree takes after Adam Bates. Dupree's against the Dirt Saints anyhow and now this'll be his excuse. We got to warn Adam Bates and his Land Prophets so they can be ready."

"What's this Dirt Saint got to do with the fight, in the first place?" Maggie demanded.

Pat hesitated. He rubbed his battered, bruised chin with the palm of his hand.

Maggie was glaring at him. "What you stalling for?" she said, angrily. "Why don't you answer my question?"

"Well," Pat said, reflectively.

"So that was the Dirt Saint you were asking about when you first came to?" Maggie snapped. "And you told me you would have fought any man that had been taking pokes at a woman. That it wasn't for me, special. All right. I took that. But now I see about this Dirt Saint. Is that what they call that gang that's camping in their wagons outside of town, spending their time singing hymns and such? Is that what this gent was that started fighting over me?"

Pat nodded slowly. Opened his mouth to speak.

"So that's how it was?" Maggie snapped. "You weren't even fighting over me or for me. The Dirt Saint started the fight and then he was getting licked so you went in to help out. I wasn't even in it so far as you were concerned, eh, Pat?"

Pat Stevens swallowed—tried to think. He didn't want to tell her she was right. She wasn't right, entirely. He said, "Well, you see it was this way, Maggie. The kid, that's Adam

Bates, the young Dirt Saint, he saw Dupree start beating you and he took after Dupree and then I realized what a mess it was going to make with Dupree already trying to get an excuse to drive out the Dirt Saints. So then I figured it would be good to get the kid out of there before...."

"Sure. And I didn't figure in it at all," Maggie said. "You was just helping out that young psalm-singing fool that didn't know enough to stay out of a gambling house run by Frank Dupree. You made me make a fool of myself by bringing you over here and taking care of you because I figured you'd been kind to me. The only man that ever fought for me. The only gent that ever treated me like I was a lady. Now you tell me this—"

"I'm trying to tell you, Maggie," Pat said, desperately, "that I was—"

"You'll only make it worse," Sam said. "Let's get out of here before this she-*devil* digs out your eyes."

Maggie whirled, grabbed a bottle of perfume off the dresser and let it fly at Sam. She was screaming now. "Get out, all of you. And you too, Pat Stevens. And wait till I get to Frank Dupree and tell him how you're taking up with these Dirt Saints and how you're warning them."

She threw one shoe at them and then the other.

THE THREE were half out the door when Ezra said, "Don't forget, Maggie. Frank Dupree's gunning for you."

"Don't worry. He won't when I tell him about Stevens. And I'll tell Frank he'd better strike at the Dirt Saints tonight while—"

"He already knows Pat's against him and for the saints," Sam said as he slid backward into the hall.

"Sure," Maggie yelled. "But he doesn't know Pat'll be there. Dupree can ride out with his boys and clean out the whole lot of you."

"You're talking like a crazy woman," Pat said. "You can't do us any more harm than has been done. You'll only do yourself harm."

The pitcher off the washstand came sailing down the hall after them. It crashed against the far wall as Pat turned.

They went down the stairs to the lower floor and headed for the back of the hotel, Sam in the lead. He suddenly turned, said, "That won't do us any good, Pat, if she goes to Dupree right now and tells him we're all going out to the Dirt Saints' wagon camp. He can corral us all in one bunch."

"No," Pat said. "I was hoping I could talk her out of it. But we can't wait around now to see what she does. We got to get out to that camp and talk to Adam Bates. We got to warn him of what's going to come." He shook his head. "I'm sure sorry I asked him his name and he told me where it could be overheard."

"Wouldn't a made any difference," Sam reasoned. "If Dupree wanted to find out who it was that poked him for socking the woman, he would'a found out."

"It'll be interesting to see how the big fight breaks out in the first place," Pat said. "Kind of like a spot you know is going to catch fire but don't know where it'll first show smoke and flame."

Sam stopped short a couple of paces ahead of the other two. He held his hands wide, stood motionless. His eyes were focused out of the back door of the hotel.

There were some garbage cans and two crates and a lot of rusty tin cans strewn around the back yard. But Sam didn't seem to be looking at any of those things. He was staring out into the blinding morning sunlight at two figures that seemed to be loitering about, one on either side of the yard.

The man on the right was tall and rangy and middle-aged with a hard-looking face and his guns hanging low on his legs, near the ends of his long arms.

The one on the left was a gnarled little runt, rather fat and beefy in the chest with a thick, short neck and a pair of black marbles for eyes.

The two stood with their backs to the livery stable on the back street and their faces to the rear door of the

hotel. They stood, careless, except for the set expressions on their faces and the slightly tense position of their hanging hands.

"Welcoming committee," Sam said, hoarsely.

Looking past Sam's thick shoulder, Pat tried to plan their next move. They could stand inside the hotel and study what to do without the two men outside realizing they were being watched. The bright sun would blind the two gun-fighters to anything inside the shade of the hotel corridor.

"Dupree wasn't fooling as much as I'd hoped," Pat said.

"I told you he was gunnin' for you," Ezra said, low. "And whether I heard it actual said or not, I'll gamble the best saddle I own to a broken-legged mustang that those two out there or any of the other gun slicks Dupree hires will gut shoot you, or better, shoot you in the back, before you can say—"

"Shut up," Sam barked. "Can't you see Pat's trying to think?"

Ezra turned his one eye on Pat's long, dark face and waited.

"I was just trying to figure," Pat said. "You suppose Dupree and his men know you're friends of mine?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't reckon they do. What you figure you'd like for us to do, Pat?"

Pat rubbed his palm along the stubble of his chin. "I was thinking. A couple of men aiming to draw and shoot down a man when he came out the back door of a hotel would sure get a surprise was they to wake up about gun-drawing time and find out there was two others behind them with their guns loose in their holsters."

SAM GRINNED quickly. It took longer for the light to dawn on Ezra's disfigured face. But a comprehending smile finally came across the face with the one eye and the jagged scar.

"How you figure to work it, Pat?" Sam asked.

"Well, if you and Ezra were to go out the front door of the hotel, casual like, and one at a time, you might not be noticed much. Then if you came around to the back of the hotel, one around to the south and the other to the north, and came up behind those two gents, say about twenty feet behind them, close enough so you couldn't miss on a quick draw...."

"We're going right now," Ezra said.

"Wait a second," Sam cut in. "Pat ain't finished yet."

"That's about all," Pat said. "We'll figure out a signal to let the two gun slicks know at the right time that you're behind them."

Sam chuckled. "If this works, them two buzzards won't ever draw on a man the rest of their lives without looking 'round to make sure somebody ain't behind 'em."

"Only thing," Ezra said, "them two look like a couple of bad actors with lightning in either fist. Them guns looks mighty bad the way they wear 'em."

Sam stopped grinning and his dark face grew serious. "Pat," he said, "I'd a heap rather take a rifle and fix them buzzards than to take a chance on you."

"You'd have murder and a rope facing you," Pat said. "And there's no use starting trouble before it comes to us. We got plenty of learning to do before this war busts wide open. I reckon this is the best course for now."

"You're taking a mighty big chance with them gun slicks," Ezra said, shaking his great, red head.

"Got to take chances," Pat said. "Now go do what I tell you. And when you get set, then I'll start my end of the job."

The two left, walked out the front doors of the hotel—Sam first, then Ezra.

Pat leaned carelessly against the side wall of the hallway and waited. A minute passed, then another. And finally, a third minute dragged by.

The stocky, dark form of Sam came into view out the back door of the hotel. He was coming up behind the beefy gun-slick. He came up quietly without sound and the gunman didn't move.

Ezra came into view a moment

later. He moved up behind the rangy gunman, coming slow and casual and leaning against the hitching rail with his broad back, as if bracing for swift action.

The two stood tense, waiting, watching, less than twenty feet behind the gun fighters. Now four pairs of eyes were glued on the back door of the hotel.

Pat slapped his guns. He lifted them in their holsters, let them ride free, lifted them again to make sure, and settled them back light in their leather.

He let his head nod slowly. It was time to be moving. He said to himself, "Get going, Stevens. Go face 'em."

He stepped to the door and threw it open, walked through the opening out onto the little back stoop in plain view of the gunmen who faced him.

8

MANY conflicting thoughts raced through Pat Stevens' mind as he began walking toward the two gun slicks. There was the humorous angle of those two not knowing that Sam and Ezra had taken positions behind them. And there was the dangerous element of not being sure what these men might do in this desperate situation.

The squat gunner with the bull neck heaved up his chest a little as if he were taking a breath and getting ready to hold his chest full of air for fast action. That was the only move that he made as Pat came in his direction.

The tall man only moved his legs and arms. His legs spread a few inches wider to brace him for whatever might come. And his arms bowed slightly to lift his hands closer to his gun butts.

The action of the tall man meant something to Pat. He judged that the tall one was the more nervous of the two—the less sure of himself, his position and his skill.

The shorter of the two gun fighters spoke now. His voice was low and as musical as a blacksmith's rasp on a rough horse hoof. "Stop where you are, Stevens."

That was one slip. If he had let Pat come closer, then it would have been more difficult for Pat to cover the two men at the same time since they would have been at wider angles from him.

Pat stopped for that reason. It was a good place if it was to be a fight. He glanced past the two men, saw Ezra and Sam come up closer with hands at their gun butts, ready to draw.

"Frank Dupree sent you, I reckon," Pat said. "I figured he wouldn't have the nerve to face me himself any more than he'd dare try to lick me fist-fighting without a couple of apes on my back to hold my arms."

"We didn't come to argue," the tall man said.

"Neither did I," Pat said. "You asking for a draw fight right here—two against one?"

"You want us to gut shoot you?" the stocky one said. "Or you going to reach for iron and give yourself a chance?"

"We ain't got all day," the tall one said. "Draw your guns."

"I wouldn't talk so bold," Pat said. "Reckon I ought to offer you your chance, too."

"What chance you talking about?" the tall one demanded.

"The chance to save your skins for now. Look behind you."

"That's too old a trick," the stocky one said.

"It's no trick," Pat said. "I'm offering you a chance to get out of this without holes through you from front to back. You want to take a look behind you or take the chance of getting slugged from the rear flank?"

THE TWO were looking straight at him now. The short one spoke first. "You're not fooling us, Stevens. Draw your guns."

That was the moment that Ezra

chose to cough. The red-bearded giant could make an explosive sound with his coughing. He let it come out now in a blast.

The two gunmen froze like dummies. Their hands, ready to grab iron, remained motionless, stopped in mid-air.

As Pat had guessed, the tall, middle-aged ranny was the first one to break. A wild, scared look came into his eyes and his head jerked round, leaving him open to attack by Pat.

A split second later, the squat one turned his head, then looked back at Pat. He hadn't seen Sam in back of him, figured there was only one behind.

Pat began walking again. His gait was still stiff and unnatural, for his body was tense, ready for the fast draw if it should be necessary.

Then Sam spoke loudly from directly behind the chunky gunman. "Well, if you don't want to go in and get a drink, redhead, then let's go on back to the ranch we hired out on and get to work."

Ezra shrugged his big shoulders. "Can't make up my mind and it's too hot to figure real hard."

Pat was walking between the two gunmen now. The expressions on their faces were laughable to see. They couldn't make up their minds about this new situation.

Meantime, Pat walked between the gunmen and, with each man not more than a few feet from either elbow, said softly, "You birds are mighty jumpy for a couple of hard-bit gun slingers." Then after a second, as he slowed, "Only don't forget that Pat Stevens wasn't one to gun you in the back when you looked the other way and he had the chance."

Pat walked on, slowly, without looking back at the two. He didn't pay the slightest heed to Sam and Ezra. He heard Sam say, "Well, make up your mind about going in and getting that drink, you red-headed monkey."

Ezra said something back at him, low.

Pat walked on. It was a cinch that somebody would have taken his horse over to the livery stable after he'd been beat up. The horse would be there, well-fed, and ready to go again.

He strolled in through the front door of the stable, glanced around and saw the rump of his bay gelding in a stall halfway down the long line.

Suddenly out of the grain room Charlie Anson said, "Psssst!" And when Pat turned, Charlie said, "Hey, that was pretty good, Pat. And them two gun slicks don't know yet whether Sam and Ezra is friends of yours. Only...." Charlie's dissipated old face looked sad. "Only you didn't gun fight 'em like I was fixin' to watch you do."

"What you doing over here, Charlie?" Pat said. "You work every place in town?"

"I sleep over here, in the hay, sometimes. It was me brung your bay over. When that woman had a couple of the boys tote you over to the hotel I untied your horse and brung him over and fed him and fixed him so he'd be ready when you wanted to ride again. Only, the way you was getting beat, I didn't figure you'd be riding him for a long spell. How you feeling now, Pat? You look pretty bad yet. That Maggie didn't get down all the swelling."

"I'm all right," Pat said. "Where's my saddle?"

Charlie showed him. "You ain't got nothing on your hip this morning, besides a pocket, have you, Pat?"

"Sorry, Charlie."

Charlie showed him the saddle and drying blanket and the bridle, and he held the bay's head out of the stall while Pat saddled up.

Pat mounted and, nodding his thanks to Charlie, rode out of the livery stable. As he got under way, he shot a quick glance at the rear yard of the hotel across the street, but he couldn't see a sign of anyone about. Neither Sam nor Ezra nor the two gunmen were in sight.

He turned his horse up the back street, headed toward the dry gulch beyond the edge of town where the Land Prophets were camped.

The minute Pat came in sight of the camp he was impressed by the neatness of the place and what people he could see about it.

The wagons were in a perfect circle round the big area in the center. The earth that he could see inside, while it was dry and parched, from lack of rain, was swept clean by brush brooms.

Members of the group about the wagon turned and looked at Pat as he rode by. Suddenly, they turned away to look down the gulch trail behind Pat, and then he saw them look quickly at him again. A young man left the group, and hurried through between two wagons and disappeared inside the circle of the camp.

Pat himself looked back down the trail now. He hadn't thought of being followed. But he saw two riders well back, almost out of rifle shot but not quite.

Sam was on the left and Ezra's bright red hair and whiskers gleamed in the late morning sunshine.

The small, slim man in black turned as Pat rode by. "What can I do for you, sir?" he asked.

"I'd like to talk to your head man."

The slim man looked him over carefully with penetrating black eyes. "I'm Deacon Yost," he said. "What did you wish to see Elder Scott about?"

"I'm here friendly," Pat said.

"Those two riders back down the trail? Are they friendly, too?"

"Between you and me, they are," Pat said. "But let's not shout it out public that they're friends of mine."

"I see," Deacon Yost said. "But we don't hold with secretive, underhanded methods."

"You're dealing with secretive, under-handed folks," Pat said. "Some of it might help you a little." He turned in his saddle. "Where'll I find the Elder Scott that's your head man?"

Deacon Yost glanced down the trail at the two riders. He turned away, spoke in low tones to two young men with square, high-topped, small-brimmed black hats. He said something that Pat couldn't hear and came back to look up at Pat, sitting tall in his saddle.

"We'll let you ride in through that gap in the wagons, but alone," Yost said. "You'll find Elder Scott's wagon third to the right when you get inside."

Pat nodded.

"But your friends," Yost added, nodding to Sam and Ezra down the trail. "They won't be allowed in with you."

Pat glanced at them again. They were still coming but at a slower pace. "You'll do all right," he said. "Keep them out and I won't mind, but don't mention again that they're friends of mine."

He reined his horse through the gap between the nearest two wagons and passed inside the circle of the camp.

This wagon of Elder Scott was only slightly larger than the others. The canvas covering was about as brown and dirty from the rain and sun and dust. The body hadn't been painted any more recently than the others. But there was something about it that stamped it as the wagon of the head man. Perhaps it was the fact that wagons on either side were camped a respectful distance away.

PAT GOT down and dropped rein and the bay nuzzled the dry earth for something to eat. Pat watched him for a second, then raised his head. A pair of brown eyes were watching him.

The face at the parted flaps of the wagon end was soft and lovely, framed in a gingham sunbonnet. The eyes were steady, the mouth firm but soft. The brow was furrowed slightly with worry.

"What did you come to see my father about?" The girl's voice was low and had a note of fear in it.

Pat studied her. She was twenty, he guessed. Or perhaps younger. But she had mature eyes and a wise expression. He said, "Maybe you'd like to tell me who you are so I'll know who I'm answering."

"I'm Mary Scott," she said. "Elder

Scott is my father. Who are you?"

"The name's Stevens, ma'am. Pat Stevens."

The girl parted the flaps still more and stood up in the front of the wagon with the cover flaps together behind her like a background.

Pat glanced behind her, half-expecting the girl's mother to come out after her. He said, "Does your mother figure you should come out talking to strangers?"

"My mother died when I was a little girl," Mary Scott said, and the sadness in her voice was something Pat could well understand.

"I'm mighty sorry," he said simply.

She bent down and put one foot over the edge of the wagon to reach for the flat iron rim of the wheel. "Would you help me down?" She held out her hand to him.

He took her hand, then caught her as she jumped. He let her go when her feet touched the ground solidly. "Now maybe you'll tell me where your dad is?"

"Not until you answer some questions." She glanced at the wagon behind him, then at the wagon on the other side. "Not until you tell me why you have come."

"I told you that. I came to see your father."

Her voice was low, almost a whisper. "You're one of the town men," she said. "I can tell by your dress and your two guns. You're from the saloon and the gambling house."

Pat half-shook his head. "Well, not directly, ma'am."

She continued almost without pause in her half-whisper, "You came to tell my father about Adam, didn't you? You came to tell on him." Her large brown eyes darkened. "Well, I won't let you."

Mary Scott took a gleaming Derringer from the folds of her full skirt. She aimed the ugly thing at Pat's middle and her finger tightened on the trigger. "Get out of our camp and don't you dare ever come back. If you do, I'll—" She moved the gun menacingly.

9

PAT shifted uncomfortably. The girl had the weapon stuck almost directly into his middle. He didn't like the way her finger kept tightening on the trigger. "You want to be careful, ma'am," he said soothingly. "That more trouble than you are now. Fact thing might go off and if it did, you Land Prophets would be in a heap is, that's what I come to see your father about. About the trouble you're headed for."

"What trouble and what's that got to do with Adam?"

"About the trouble that Adam started," Pat said. "Since you mentioned his name, I reckon you're talking about Adam Bates."

"Then you did come to tell on him?"

"No," Pat said.

The fresh flash of fear didn't leave her lovely face.

"I came," Pat said, "to tell your dad that one of his boys has got to get out of camp and hide for a while if they don't want him killed."

Her face went stark white. "Adam?" she breathed. "You mean that gambler is going to."

"That's Frank Dupree you're talking about," Pat said. "He's threatened to kill Adam Bates. It's too bad I asked his name when he was there in the Palace but I did and it can't be helped now."

Some of the color began returning to Mary Scott's face. "Was it you—who stood up for Adam—and sent him out?"

Pat nodded. "I hated to see him getting mixed up in the dirty dealing that was due to go on so I jumped in and—"

She had been studying his face. Now she said, "Was that how you got those bruises on your face—fighting for Adam?"

"That was the general idea...Now can I talk to your father?"

"Wouldn't it be better to tell Adam to hide?"

Pat considered that for a moment before shaking his head. "It ain't only Adam that's involved," he said. "Frank Dupree's planning to use Adam as an excuse to make trouble for all of you. Adam hiding would save only his skin. The rest of you would still be in danger."

"What could we do about it?" Her tone mixed resignation with anger.

"I'm going to have to talk that over with your dad," Pat said. "Put that pistol away before I have to take it away from, miss."

She watched his stern face for an instant and her own eyes wavered. "Oh, all right. But if you don't have to tell about Adam being at the saloon and gambling place—"

"I'll see about it," Pat broke in. "Where's your dad?"

She had lowered the Derringer and it was hidden again in the folds of her skirt. She nodded to a group of men far to the north end of the camp ground opening. "Over there. He's the tall one with heavy features. He hasn't any beard or mustache."

Pat nodded. "I sure thank you. And I'll try not to talk about your boy friend any worse than I can help."

She didn't make a move as he mounted. She seemed to be trying to make up her mind about Pat.

In order not to appear too conspicuous, Pat stayed to the edge of the wagon circle instead of cutting across the middle of the space in plain view. As he approached, he saw that there were a dozen men grouped in a circle, sitting on turned-up water casks. They all wore the same black head-pieces with high crowns, squared across the top, and narrowed brims.

A tall, raw boned, heavy-shouldered man rose from the group. He had black eyes, a solid jaw and great arms that hung relaxed at his sides.

It was easy to see that this man was the leader. It stood out upon his angular, clean-shaven face the way his wagon stood out in the ring of wagons.

He stood eyeing Pat without a trace of a smile on his face. "Yes" he said.

Pat reined his bay about and got down. He walked slowly to meet the man, faced him over the upturned faces of the other men. "Elder Scott?"

The man nodded his head.

"Stevens is my name. I'd like to talk to you."

"You may talk here," Elder Scott said.

"I'd like to talk to you alone," Pat reapeated.

"This is the council of elders," Scott said. "They have a right to know what information may come to me. You may talk freely."

Pat shifted uncomfortably from one high-heeled boot to the other. He braced himself, hooking his thumbs in his gun belts. "It's about a fight one of your men got in in town last evening."

He saw the sudden change of expression on all the faces.
then, had come to them as a surprise and a shock.

"The name of the man don't matter," Pat went on. "The main thing is that—"

ELDER SCOTT'S deep, mellow voice cut in on him. "Who was this man of our camp?"

"I told you, it don't matter about the name. What you should be interested in is—"

Elder Scott began walking toward Pat and the men of the circle rose as he moved. They parted to let the tall, powerful leader through the circle.

"I demand to know the name." Scott's words were cold and authoritative.

"Young man," Scott said. "You are in the presence of a group strange to you. You will find it much safer if you do as you are ordered."

Pat glared back at him. "Scott, you'll find I don't take to orders very good. You'll also find that if you don't take information that I come to

give you the way I figure I want to give it, you're going to be in for trouble."

They stood like that for what seemed a full minute. Then, Elder Scott said, a little warmth in his tone, "Am I to understand that you came to bring us information for our own good?"

"You're getting the idea real well," Pat drawled.

"You said you came to give us information about one of our number who had been in a fight," Elder Scott went on. "I assumed that you were one of the Palace Saloon's men, come to order us out."

"You assumed wrong," Pat said shortly.

Now Scott seemed eager for him to go on. But Pat waited, compelling the elder to work for it.

"You don't wish to disclose the name of the one who fought in town?"

"That's right," Pat nodded. "It wouldn't make any difference if I've got to tell it in public. But it might be that you wouldn't want me to tell it to the other elders. So I'm not saying a word about it." Pat took out paper and makings and twisted a cigarette. "You want me to tell you the rest of it, or not?"

Elder Scott turned to the others of the council. "Will you excuse me, gentlemen?" He took Pat's arm. "Shall we go where we can talk?"

They walked together toward a lone pile of camp equipment that penned in the cattle of the prophets.

"Scott," Pat said, "I wouldn't be surprised if you and I would get along after all."

"What makes you say that?"

"A leader that can admit that he's wrong is a big man. I reckon you're that kind of a leader, from the signs I've seen so far. Now about this one that got into the fight."

Elder Scott was silent, waiting for Pat to continue.

"I didn't figure you'd want the other elders to know that it was your daughter's boy friend."

Except for the tightening of his jaw muscles, Scott's face did not change expression. After a moment, he said, "You're sure it was Adam Bates?"

"That's what he told me his name was when I came into the fight to help him."

"You helped him? How did this all happen?"

We were standing on the street across from the Palace Saloon," Pat lied. "I think Adam Bates had just come out from buying something in a store when he saw Frank Dupree come out of his saloon and start beating up this woman, Maggie McCabe, that he used to know. He knocked her down and that was when Adam barged in and started swinging on Frank Dupree."

Elder Scott took a breath. "Let me understand this. You say Adam was defending a woman when he got into this fight?"

PAT DIDN'T have to lie to say what he said then. He told it straight, told how he warned Bates to head for home in a hurry before he got into more trouble.

"I'm proud of Adam," Scott said. "I'm proud he would do such a thing." He almost smiled, shook his great head. "Adam is a hot-headed young man. Quick to anger, is Adam. I feared you were going to tell me he had become involved in a saloon brawl that would reflect on the good name we hope to establish here."

"Well, as a matter of fact, what he did ain't going to do the name of the Land Prophets any great good. You know that Frank Dupree is trying to get you to move."

Scott nodded. "He sent his town marshal up to warn us we'd have to move. He's been up twice."

"Now he's going to come up by force and move you," Pat said bluntly. "At least that's the rumor. Adam Bates attacking Dupree has made matters a heap worse for you. Dupree's going to gun Adam Bates down, him or some of his gun fighters."

"You mean," Scott said incredulous-

ly, "that this Frank Dupree is going to kill Adam Bates in cold blood for attacking him with his fists when he was beating a woman?"

"You get the idea fine. You see, men like Dupree don't take to getting beat around the head by the fists of a young member of a group that Dupree's been making fun of and laughing at and calling Dirt Saints. You knew they call you that, I reckon?"

Elder Scott nodded slowly. "I had heard of that. What they call us doesn't matter. My only concern is that we should be able to claim the lands our deeds grant to us here, and settle down to peaceful living."

"I'd sure be pleased to see these deeds you got from Washington to come out and settle in Powder Valley."

"They're good," Elder Scott said. "I went to Washington and got them myself. Washington issued them and they must be good. But the clerk of your county, Mr. Kelso, tells me that there is no chance of surveying them out since there are no such markers as the deeds mention."

Pat tipped his wide-brimmed hat forward and thoughtfully scratched his head behind his ear. "That's the queerest thing I ever did hear," he said finally.

"If you'll come to my wagon, I'll show you the first deed. That gives directions as to how to begin the survey for the land."

Pat whistled to his bay and the horse, with head sidewise to drag the reins, followed them over.

Mary Scott came out of the wagon flaps as they approached and Elder Scott said, "I believe you've talked with my daughter. I saw you getting directions before you came to me."

Pat winked at her.

She watched her father with concern as he went into the wagon. "Have you told him?" she whispered.

Pat nodded and winked again. "We made Adam a hero this time. Wait and see how—"

Elder Scott came out of the wagon and dropped to the ground. "Mary, you should be proud of Adam," he said. "Do you know what this young man has just told me about him?"

Elder Scott then told his daughter the story that Pat had given him, and as he talked, the fear slowly went from Mary's eyes. She smiled at Pat for the first time then, and though she didn't say anything with words, her eyes said, "Thank you."

Scott handed Pat the deed he had brought out.

Pat unfolded it and looked it over quickly. It was legal, all right. It was signed by the proper Washington authority. More carefully he began reading the description of the property location.

"I understand Mr. Kelso, the clerk, is not entirely reliable," Elder Scott ventured.

"Reliable," Pat exclaimed. "He's a darn crook. He stole my Lazy Mare Ranch for taxes that I know mighty well I paid. And he sold it for six thousand dollars to one of your men, Luke Brice."

"He's sold some fine ranches to others of our group," Scott said. "But so far they have had no cause to mistrust him. However, from his actions over these deed locations, I have come to suspect he is trying to deny us the land that Washington has properly granted us."

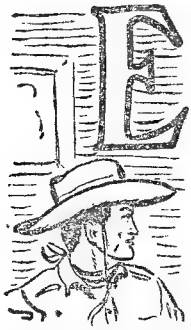
"What does he say that makes *you* think he's crooked?"

"He tells me that there is no such marking point and that the general description of the deeds does not fit this location in any way," Elder Scott replied. "He tells us it is impossible to record those deeds or find any land so described in them. And while we wait my people grow discouraged and buy ranches from him."

Pat Stevens kept studying the deed description. And the more he studied it, the deeper became the furrows in his forehead. He looked up, finally, and there was a baffled expression on his face.

"Elder Scott," he said. "Now *I've* got some bad news for *you*. As far as I can figure, Harvey Kelso has told you the truth."

10



ELDER Scott's long chin dropped and his wide mouth gaped open. "You?" he said. "You agree with him?" He frowned. "Maybe you've come from him, then, to convince us that we have no right to our land."

"You've made a lot of wrong guesses today, Scott," Pat said. His eyes were hard. "Accusing a man of teaming up with either Frank Dupree or Harvey Kelso is as good as telling a man to draw his guns in my language."

"The fact that you agree with Kelso doesn't exactly make you his enemy," Scott insisted.

"The fact that I agree with him on this deed could mean that you just don't belong here, Scott."

"But Washington gave us those deeds to land grants," Elder Scott persisted. He lowered his voice. "Just what part of the description in the deed doesn't sound right?"

Pat held up the deed for him to see, placed his index finger at the beginning of the description. "Starting at the beginning and running on down all the way."

"There is some error?"

"It's crazy," Pat said, "right from the start. It says 'Beginning on the northeast corner of the Devil's Hook two miles south of Dutch Springs... a line running...' And from there on. Because there ain't any such place as the Devil's Hook in this country. None that I ever heard of, anyway."

"Nothing that could have been described as such in old records that Washington might have?"

"I reckon any old records Washington might have would show up under the eye of Harvey Kelso. There's a little gent that I don't believe ever missed a trick so far as being correct is concerned. I never heard tell of anybody catching him of a mistake he made on the records of the country." Pat stopped and thought a moment. "Maybe one mistake. When he figured he could get away with taking my Lazy Mare ranch. That ain't going to stay like that forever."

"If a man can make one mistake, he can make others," Elder Scott said, hopefully.

Pat continued to study the deed description. "I'm wondering if there could be a misprint someplace," he said. "Like some point down there that was called something like the Devil's Hook. Only I can't figure any place along the plain two miles south of Dutch Springs that would make a good marker. It's just nothing much more than open prairie, you might say."

"I can agree with you on that point," Scott said. "Some of the elders and I have been down there, two miles south of Dutch Springs. We found nothing but some strewn rocks that might once have been a monument of some sort of marking a point in the plain."

Pat frowned in thought. "Now that you mention it," he said, "seems there was something there. A kind of a grave marker or something, with a dozen rocks piled one atop of the other. I'd plump forgot about that."

"We'll go down and see about it," Scott decreed.

"Not just now, I wouldn't," Pat said. "I'd keep everybody in this camp in as full force as I could. And we might as well get back to what I came to advise you about. I'd be glad to take Adam Bates out to my Lazy Mare ranch with Luke Brice, for safe hiding."

Elder Scott considered. His daughter, Mary, said, "I think we should do as Mr. Stevens says, Dad."

"The name is Pat, if you don't mind, ma'am. I once got called that 'Mister' business in a big hotel in Denver. It cost me a heap of money keeping up with it before I got out with the bills paid."

Pat glanced at Mary. She stood straight and tall, look-up at him, studying him. Then, apparently satisfied, she turned her eyes toward her

father. "We can trust Pat Stevens, Dad," she said at last.

Pat glanced at Scott. He was studying Pat, too. Suddenly the flicker of a smile crossed his face. "I believe you are right, Mary. I feel that we can trust him, although I'm not sure as you seem to be."

"I'm sure," she said. "I'm sure we should accept his judgement in what we should do. He's been very helpful so far. That proves we can trust him."

Pat heard Elder Scott saying, "My daughter seems to have a sense about people that can be trusted." He nodded solemnly at his daughter. "If you say Pat Stevens can be trusted, Mary, we shall try to trust him." He turned to Pat. "Now, young man, just what is it that you propose we do?"

"Well," Pat said, "first thing, I'd—"

He broke off at the sound of yelling from far to the right, down by the wide opening between wagons that served as an entrance gate.

SOMEONE was shouting the name of Pat Stevens. The voice was Ezra's. He was shouting, "Get Pat Stevens to come out here, I tell you, or you'll wish you'd never turned a wheel toward Powder Valley."

Pat reached for the reins of his bay gelding, the horse shying at the quick movement. He lunged for the bridle and caught hold of it and swung the animal around to mount.

A horseman broke from the ring at the entrance to the camp and Sam Sloan came charging in, riding his bay on a full run.

He reared the horse back to a stop and swung a stocky leg over the cantle. "Pat," he said, his breath coming fast, "tell these folks that Frank Dupree and all his gun fighters is coming up, heading this way. Coming slow, like they know what they're after and have lots of time to take care of it. I been trying to convince them monkeys at the gate that this is no trick."

Pat turned to face Elder Scott The two groups of men had moved in now, so that they could hear what was being said. The women had also come nearer. They stood quietly, in a tight knot.

Scott's face was dark and tense. "I trust we do not have to fight and kill for our rights, but if we do"—he squared his shoulders—"if we do have to fight and kill, we shall not be found wanting in courage." He turned to the two groups of men, the older and the younger. "Bring your rifles and shotguns, men. Let us be ready."

"That's a good idea," Pat said. "But I wouldn't start any gun play. If you do, somebody's going to get hurt a lot of times and a lot of ways. Dupree, I reckon, has got a flock of gun fighters that would rather kill than eat, provided they don't stand too much chance of getting shot back. Show all the strength you can muster, but don't fire a shot. Not till they start shooting."

Ezra came riding into the circle now. He pointed to the ridge of the gulch high above them.

"Don't think you're going to sneak anything over on these hombres," he said. "Look yonder, that spy standing on the rimrock watching."

A familiar young voice spoke from the band of young men. "I could pick him off with my granddaddy's Sharps if you'd give the word, Elder Scott." It was Adam Bates speaking. "I'd like mighty well to do it if it would atone for the wrong I did."

"You have—" Elder Scott began to say.

But Pat Stevens cut him off. "There's no time to fuss around now. I reckon they're coming for you, Adam, and we got to find some way of hiding you." Pat turned to Sam and Ezra. "You two got to ride on out of here. From that rimrock Dupree's scout can tell how many leaves here. He saw you two come in. If he sees you two ride out up the gulch he'll know it's the same two. He'll know it from Ezra's red hair, even if he can't see faces distinct at that distance. So he'll know that Adam Bates didn't escape with you two. Then that'll mean that you, Adam, left here some time ago. At least we hope Du-

pree will think so. And as far as I'm concerned, I don't matter much. If the scout was watching me, he may figure I'm just another of you Land Prophets come back from town or something. But it wouldn't do any good to hang around here. I might bring you more trouble if Dupree was to find me here. So Adam and I will hide where they won't find us and you, you men of the camp, show your force with guns, but give Dupree what he wants."

Deacon Yost had come in from the gate entrance. He said, "It seems to me that if we are to have a showdown, we should have it now. We will never be stronger than we are now."

There's a couple of reasons," Pat said. "One is that I got some work to do on Harvey Kelso's past before I'm ready for open war. And I also got a little work to do on Frank Dupree's past records. After I get them, we may be able to prevent so many folks geting killed in the fighting. Meantime, I'm advising that you all act strong, but peaceful. If Dupree wants to search the wagons and every inch of the camp for Adam Bates, tell him to go ahead. But remind him he ain't to harm a hair of anybody here or he'll suffer. Dupree, I reckon, don't understand anything but force. So show it."

"Where will you be?" Deacon Yost demanded.

"Right here with you. Adam and I'll be right among you if I can rig us up the way I want."

Mary Scott stood looking up into Pat's eyes. "Are you sure you know what you're doing—with Adam?"

"Pretty much, if he behaves himself," Pat said. He turned to the elders and younger men. "What I *want* you to do is go into your wagons and bring out all the guns you can find. Arm all the men and if you got any left, let your women hold them where Dupree can see them. Let the women be ready to shoot if they have to. Let 'em look like that, anyhow." He turned to Sam and Ezra. "How much longer we got?" Wasn't that the way you recollected it?"

"Ten minutes," Sam said.

EZRA NODDED his agreement. "We climbed the knoll to the east of the trail as we came. And we looked back to see if anybody was coming to box you in, Pat."

"That was after I spotted the lone scout up on the rimrock there above

"All right," Ezra said. "It was Sam that saw the scout up there and he said we should look back and see if the scout was going to signal anybody behind. So we climbed the knoll and looked back and that was when we saw Dupree and his men starting from the corral back of the Palace Saloon. They're coming at a single foot so you got time for getting ready."

"You two fork your horses and get on out of the camp and up the gulch," Pat said. "Pretend that you're just riding on. But watch for long-range rifle shooting from the rimrock. May be more than one up there and with a rifle they can pick off a couple of men a long way off."

"Let 'em see us but don't give 'em a good target, eh Pat?" Sam grinned. He forked his horse as he said it.

Ezra mounted and they rode off up the camp circle, threaded their way between two wagons and rode on up the dusty gulch trail.

Adam Bates was standing tense, a little pale, but hard set in the tilt of his jaw. "I don't have to hide from anybody," he said. "I'll stay and fight it out with them, fists or guns."

"You don't know what you're saying," Pat said. "Sometimes it's smarter to hide in this case and that's what you're going to do."

"Hide where?" Adam demanded, his face flushing. He glanced at Mary for a second and back at Pat.

"Hide in some skirts and some rope hemp," Pat said.

"If you want the rope hemp for long hair," Mary broke in, "I've got a better idea. The carriage horse we brought out has beautiful curly hair in her tail. I could cut some off and tuck it around your sunbonnets and it would be real genuine looking."

"You get that hair and somebody better figure us out a couple of real long dresses," Pat said.

Adam shook his head. "I'm not dressing up like a woman for nobody."

Pat turned to Elder Scott and Mary. "You talk to him. I got no time to argue over such foolishness. He'll either dress like a woman or lie and rot dressed like a dead man with his boots on."

Pat turned then toward the women of the camp. A big, raw-boned woman, nearly as tall as Pat, stepped out of the group and said, "I have two dresses I could loan you men if it would help. I think I'm the tallest here."

Pat nodded his thanks, said they'd come into her wagon and get them on. And shoes would help, if their feet should show.

Elder Scott brought Adam over. "He's willing to do as you say," the elder said. "Adam, I suspect, is afraid of looking like a sissy. I told him that after what he had done, no one could possibly consider him anything but a brave man."

Pat and Adam followed the woman over to her wagon. Pat studied the whole picture as they crossed the camp ground. The scout was still up on the rimrock, watching. But there wasn't anything unusual about crossing the camp grounds now. Every member of the Land Prophets was heading for his wagon. The space in the circle was dotted all over with men and women returning, hurrying to get their guns and show signs of strength.

Adam Bates was saying, "What did you tell Elder Scott about the fight?" He said it almost in a whisper, walking close to Pat.

Pat answered loud enough for the tall woman walking ahead of them to hear. "I told him just as it was. I told him how we'd been across the street from the Palace when you came out of a store and saw Dupree slapping Maggie McCabe down into the gutter and beating her. I told him how you ran to Dupree and knocked him down.

Adam shot him another quick glance, bowed his head. "I reckon so —if you say so," he said, softly, "And I sure thank you."

THEY REACHED the wagon and the tall woman invited them inside. She got two dresses out of her hump-backed trunk—a gray one for Pat and a dark brown one for Adam. She laid out a couple of her sunbonnets and some shoes and then went out. Pat and Adam put on the dresses, then tried on the shoes but none of them would fit. They took off their boots and walked in their socks. This took a few inches off their height so that the dresses dragged the ground properly as they should.

"Don't reckon nobody'll see our feet," Pat said, "if we don't have to run."

Someone was knocking on the front end of the wagon. Adam went and Pat heard him say, "Thanks an awful lot, Mary." Then she said something low that Pat didn't catch and Adam replied, "We'll be all right." He added in a lower voice, "Who you worried most about—him, or me?"

"I'm worried about you both," Mary said.

"Him, or me?" Adam said, angrily and a little louder.

"You're being ridiculous. And there isn't much more time. Take this hair and tuck it around the edges of your sunbonnet and stop acting like a child," Mary said.

Pat could see her turn her back and walk away, heading across the camp ground for the Scott wagon.

Bending low to pass under the loops of the canvas between the wagon bows, Adam came back to Pat in the rear. He held out half the curled horse hair. "Here. Mary brought it for you."

"Thanks," Pat said. "And listen to what I'm going to tell you. If you spoil this thing by acting like a kid while those buzzards are looking for you, I'll hope they gut shoot you full of holes. Now pull on that sunbonnet and hold still while I pretty you up with this curly horse hair."

Adam stood still. His face was purple with rage. Pat tucked the hair around the edges of his bonnet. Then Stevens pulled on another sunbonnet

and said, "Now you do the same to me."

Adam stuffed the hair around more roughly than necessary, said brusquely, "Where do we carry our guns?"

"We don't. Not unless you want 'em to think we're a pair of Calamity Janes. And everybody, even Frank Dupree, knows she don't live around these diggings."

They climbed out of the back of the wagon and circled it. Once in the open, Pat said, "Remember you're being watched by that scout on the rimrock. Take shorter steps and act like a lady."

Adam Bates looked sullenly out from the hood of his bonnet and said nothing.

A large group of the prophets and their wives was gathered before the chief elder's wagon. Mary was there and she smiled at them, a scared little smile. "You look wonderful," she said low.

Elder Scott came over, paused in passing. "Supose they should demand that we pack up and move at once?" he asked.

"Stall him," Pat said. "Haven't you got a couple of folks that are sick in their wagons.?"

"We have one. Deacon Moore's wife is ill in their wagon."

"That's good enough. Say if you move her she'll die. Tell him you got to stay another week or two, then you'll move."

"But that would be a lie," Elder Scott said. "We have no intention of moving. We aim to stay right here until we get our land grants."

"Look, Elder. This Frank Dupree will lie, cheat, steal or kill to get what he wants. It ain't going to hurt you in the sight of the Lord to tell a snake a little lie."

Elder Scott considered. He nodded slowly. "Perhaps you are right. I shall do as you say if the necessity arises."

Adam Bates was waiting for him to tell him what to do. He looked lost in his outfit, like a tall, gaunt, wilted old lady with chestnut hair.

"We got to get you in the background someplace," Pat said.

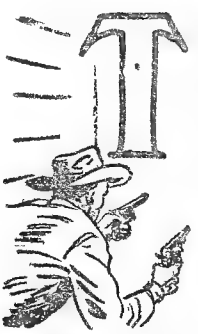
He led him to where a group of women were sitting on boxes and the tongue of one of the wagons. Pat pointed to the singletrees up close to the wagon. "You sit on one of them and I'll sit on the other. Just don't say nothing or make a move all the time Dupree and his boys are here."

One of the women passed him a mortar with some corn in it. "Grind that corn slow with this pestle," she said, handing him a round knobbed instrument.

Pat nodded. "Thanks a heap." He looked quickly at the others about them and then sat with his hands folded in his lap, the largeness of them half-hidden in the heavy folds of the full dress.

They sat in silence, waiting. Then, off toward the gate entrance came the thud of hooves in dust, and a wild blast of gunfire shattered the air.

11



THE BUSTLING about of the prophets ceased with the gun shots. As running horses charged in through the gate of the wagon circle, Pat recognized the two gun fighters that had been waiting for him outside the hotel. They were among the first six riders to come bursting through. They were shooting their guns in the air and yelling.

Pat spoke low to Adam. He said, "See Dupree there?He's the one riding along behind the first four. If any shooting starts, he'll let the first four take it and he'll turn and run."

There were more riders pouring in —a full dozen behind Dupree and all of them with their guns firing into the air.

"Damn fools," Pat said. "If we wanted to take 'em we'd wait till they'd most emptied their guns and then turn ours loose on 'em."

"I'd like to turn my guns loose on

'em right now," Adam said, feverishly.

"You may get the chance before this is over. Meantime, get that corn ground. That's the main thing that concerns you right now."

They watched the horsemen run their horses toward the knot of men at the far end of the field. Elder Scott was there now with the other elders, standing tall and bronzed, with his severe black, narrow-brimmed hat tipped back slightly, his head erect, and his rifle held in both hands, at his hip, where he could blast at any member of the band without taking much aim. While the riders raced toward them, Scott and his men stood their ground unflinchingly. Almost upon them, the horses of Dupree's men reared back and Dupree rode through between his four head gun fighters, like a conqueror to make his terms with a defeated enemy.

Down with the women, Pat and Adam could hear Dupree's voice. "I'm gunning for a no good son that knocked me down without provocation. I'm gunning to kill him and we're going to search this ragged camp until we find him."

They could hear Elder Scott's answer, too, coming like thunder out of a mountain gorge. "Search the camp and help yourself. We'll not hinder you if you don't harm us."

"You're mighty well prepared for shooting, I notice," Dupree said. "Don't make any mistakes with those guns, or my boys will kill every one of you."

"There won't be any trouble if you don't start it," Elder Scott warned.

Dupree wheeled his horse, waved to his men. "Split up. You there, take this side. Search every wagon, top to spanner. The rest take the other side. I'll meet you at the gate."

Dupree rode back then to the center of the camp. He sat his horse alone there, straight and overbearing, putting on a grandstand show for all to see. Meanwhile his men came on down, searching wagon after wagon.

The two who had waited to gun Pat when he came out of the hotel were turning now, making up their minds which side to take. They swung suddenly, dismounted and began working along the line of wagons that would bring them down past Pat and Adam Bates.

"If they come too close," Adam breathed, "I'll brain them with this pestle." He raised the corn cruncher a little and then went on grinding the grain.

"You'll do nothing," Pat insisted. "No more talk now. Your voice would give you away."

He looked up at another group of women three wagons up the line. They were seated along the tongue of the wagon there, and he saw Mary with them. She shot a glance down the row at the older women and at Pat and Adam, then looked away again.

One of Dupree's men on the other side came out of a wagon whooping and waving a pair of women's red underdrawers.

Pat held his breath. Deacon Yost, with the younger men, was raising his rifle to his shoulder.

"Deacon Yost," Elder Scott commanded. "No shooting without my order."

The deacon hesitated, then lowered his rifle.

ELDER Scott was bellowing again, this time to Dupree. "We gave you permission to search this camp for a man, not to make a laughing stock of our personal belongings."

"We search the way we damn well please," Dupree shouted back.

"This is our camp," Elder Scott roared back. "You'll search it like gentlemen or not at all."

As Dupree's hands lowered toward his guns, he cast his eyes at the Land Prophets ringed about him and his men. He was looking into rifles that had been slowly raised to the shoulder and aimed.

He nodded to the gunman flaunting the red flannel drawers. "Put 'em back," he yelled.

The two gunmen came on down the line—the short, stocky one and the tall, middle-aged, rangy man—and stopped at the group of young women farther along. The rangy one called,

"Hey, Gurky. Look at this pretty one. She's got brown eyes the way you like." He pointed at Mary while he said something more behind his hand to Gurky. Gurky laughed and moved closer, his guns slapping a little against his stocky legs.

"Pretty, ain't she? Hey, girly, what's your name?"

Pat was sitting tight, watching the scene and watching Adam at the same time.

Leaning forward a little with the pestle weighted in his hand, Adam was a bundle of taut muscle. His lips were moving slowly, as if he were talking to himself, cursing or praying.

Pat reached over and laid a heavy hand on his arm. "Take it easy, Bates," he said softly.

Gurky was saying, "Hey, girly, you know where a young gent named Adam Bates is hiding at around here?"

Elder Scott called loudly, threateningly, from beyond. "You are searching this camp and I'll order you to say nothing to our women."

Gurky didn't seem to hear. He reached out to cup Mary Scott's chin in his thick hand.

Mary was on her feet instantly, and her hand moved so fast it was difficult to see. There was a loud report as she slapped Gurky with her open hand full across the face.

Adam Bates was on his feet, the pestle in one hand and the mortar of corn in the other. Just as he leaped toward Gurky, Pat grabbed for him. His hand caught on the dress, and the pull yanked Bates off balance. "Sit down, you damn fool. Her father's got the powder and the ammunition if he has to."

Adam growled out something Pat couldn't catch. It didn't matter. Pat dragged him back to the single-tree and he sat down with a jolt.

"I ought to beat your head off," Pat whispered. "You're not such a brave buzzard. You're just a darn fool playing to the stage, making out you was made to save the ladies. Sit down or I'll brain you with that thing you got in your hand."

Gurky had staggered back when the girl struck him across the face.

A roar from Elder Scott sounded across the camp and a barked command from Dupree followed.

Then, another rider galloped in from the far side, near the elders' group, and reared his horse up to Dupree in the center. "There was two that got away," he said. "What two?" Dupree demanded. "What did they look like? Was one about six feet tall, young, have one of these black hats like the rest wear?"

The scout from the top of the rimrock shook his head. "These both looked older. One was stocky and dark and the other was big as any man and had red hair and a red beard."

Gurky turned his slapped face, to offer, "That must have been the two that come up behind us when we—when we was out back of the hotel—after that—"

"After that Stevens hombre you wanted," Ringo said. "You recollect us telling you, Dupree?"

Dupree nodded savagely. 'Keep on looking. Adam Bates wasn't either one of them."

Gurky and Ringo came on toward the group of older women.

Pat had just time to whisper one more warning to Adam. "You let me do the thinking. Don't you do nothing but grind that corn unless you see me stand up. If I get up and start something, you can join in. Otherwise, you think about getting that corn real fine."

ADAM SAT with head bowed. Pat could see a little of one side of his jaw, the muscle bulging from the tension on his clenched teeth. He worked the pestle on the corn in the mortar, ground it as if he had Gurky's head in there and were working on it at will.

Ringo came out of the next wagon cursing and Gurky came on toward the older women, ahead of him.

"Never can tell where you might find that Adam Bates hiding if he's here," Frank Dupree yelled from the center of the camp. "He might be hiding any place—or sitting right among the others with some kind of a disguise on."

Gurky stood now before the older

women. He stood with his short, stocky legs wide apart and his thumbs in his gunbelts. Ringo came up to him and studied the women beside him. He said, "He might even be disguised as one of these old women, only any man that'd dress like a woman, specially an old one, to get out of gun fighting, would be the lowest kind of a coward."

"That's the kind of a coward this Adam Bates was," Gurky said. "Recollect how he hit Dupree and then run away?"

Pat tried to sit relaxed, but under the fullness of the long dress his muscles were hard as iron.

He didn't dare look at Adam to see what he was doing.

Ringo laughed. "Imagine getting low enough so you'd dress up in an old lady's dress to hide away from gun fighting."

"Here's a big one that might be a man, Gurky said.

Pat could feel the tension in the air. He raised his eyes for a split second and looked at the old lady, sitting near the end of the wagon tongue. She had been the one who had loaned them the clothes to dress in. She was the largest of the women in the camp.

Gurky was walking up to her. She sat with her head bowed slightly, her eyes seemingly cast upon the ground. Gurky reached out his hand to lift her face.

"Touch her and you die." The voice of Elder Scott roared out across the camp.

Gurky froze instantly, his hands like claws, ready to grab iron.

Pat shifted his eyes toward the group of elders. They had their rifles aimed now, not at Dupree in the center of the circle but at Gurky standing before the old ladies, ready to grab.

Frank Dupree was reining his horse, riding over toward the scene. "Keep your hands off the women, Gurky," he said.

"He was just having some fun, Dupree," Ringo put in. "Yeah," Gurky whined. "If we don't look at their faces, how we going to tell if it's the Bates skunk?"

Pat could feel the singletree on the other side of the tongue move as Gurky called Adam a skunk. He shifted his eyes. Adam was still sitting there. He could see his long legs under the dress. But he couldn't see his face. And the pestle had stopped grinding the corn. That was a bad sign.

"Listen to me, you old women," Frank Dupree barked.

Not one of the old ladies moved.

"I'm sitting here on my horse and I want you to look up at me so I can see your faces. I want to see all your faces, understand?"

Suddenly, Pat felt the horse hair slip a little on the left side of his sunbonnet. It was gradually working out on that side. Instinctively he moved his hand to tuck it back, but halted the motion almost before it began. To show one of those big paws of his might give him away. It was better to sit tight and take a chance.

He glanced cautiously at the other women. They were sitting as before, without raising their faces.

Frank Dupree cursed loudly at the women, and the angry elders started toward him. Scott thundered, "We'll have no more cursing here, especially before our women."

"You'll take what cursing I want to give and like it," Dupree shouted.

SCOTT motioned with his head toward the young men's group. "Look over there, Dupree. There's a dozen rifles aimed at your head and they're all crack shots." Scott raised his voice. "If Dupree utters another curse, pull your triggers."

Dupree sat motionless, looking at his men, spread out all over the camp. Pat had lifted his eyes now and he could see Dupree's face. It was growing pale. Dupree lifted his hand to his forehead and wiped away the sweat with the palm.

"You've searched every place you could find," Scott was saying. "You've had your chance, Dupree."

"We got four more wagons to search on this side and there's three more on the other." Dupree's voice was sullen.

"Then search them quickly and be gone."

"You're not getting rid of me this easy," Dupree floundered. "I'm giving you warning to get out and leave this whole country. There's no place here for a bunch of psalm-singing saints that come meddling into other folk's business."

Elder Scott paused, studied the man.

"Search the rest of the wagons and anything else you find," Dupree barked to his men.

Elder Scott stood nearby to divert attention from the old women. "Search and welcome but don't harm our people. That is all we ask. We don't mean any harm to anyone, Mr. Dupree." He was stalling for time and peace, as Pat had suggested he should. "We came into this beautiful valley with deeds to land, granted by the government. We have our rights but we don't wish to disturb anyone else who is living lawfully and in peace with his neighbor."

"Stop preaching at me," Dupree snarled. He turned on Gurky and Ringo, who were still standing before the old women's group, waiting for Dupree to tell them what to do. Dupree yelled at them. "Go on and finish the other wagons. What kind of a man would be dressed in skirts? Get on with the searching and let's get out of this place."

Elder Scott almost smiled as Gurky and Ringo moved on. He said, "I thought you looked like a fair man, Mr. Dupree. I believe you have some good in you, too. Surely your mother must have taught you the rudiments of peaceful living with your fellowman."

"Shut up your preaching, I said," Dupree turned in his saddle, and his face was ominously dark with rage. "Get this searching done. We're moving on now."

The men on the other side of the camp mounted their horses, finished. Gurky and Ringo and the others came out of the last two wagons and forked their saddles.

Dupree turned back then and pointed a finger at Elder Scott. "You're going to leave here in short order. I'm giving you notice now. If you ain't out in the next few days, I'm coming in with men enough to run you out. And them that don't run easy, dies right here."

He reined his horse around, put spurs to the animal and swiftly led his men out of the camp.

12

PAT SAT motionless for some time after they had faded out of sight. Finally he glanced up at the rimrock above the gulch. The scout was gone. No one was watching.

Pat rose and stretched. He glanced at the red face of Adam Bates. "You did all right, son," he said.

Adam muttered something under his breath and turned toward the wagon where they had put on the women's clothes.

"Nobody's going to call me a coward," he said angrily.

Elder Scott's voice was calm. "Adam, I admire you. It takes more courage and self-control to stand the ordeal of ridicule than it does to fight. You have shown today that you are a very brave man, indeed."

Adam waited a moment, then walked on to get off the dress and the sunbonnet and the hair from the horse's tail.

Pat turned to Elder Scott. "Elder, the way you can sling the blarney when you have to, you must have some Irish in you."

Elder Scott coughed and wiped his big hand across his mouth. He smiled ever so slightly. "A little—on my father's side."

Mary Scott was coming toward them, her eyes resting softly on Pat's bronzed long face. "Pat, I want to thank you for everything you did. Father and I and all the rest appreciate it very much, don't we, Dad?"

"Indeed we do. And I'm sure Adam Bates would appreciate it, also, if he weren't so mortified in that dress

that he couldn't think of anything else."

"You sure took your nerve in your hands, slapping down that squat little gun fighter, Miss Scott," Pat said. "It's a good thing the men had a bead on him when you did it."

"Mary's got a temper, like Adam," the elder said. "I ofter wonder how they'll get along after they're married."

She looked up quickly, glaring at her father.

Pat ambled over to the wagon where he and Adam had changed clothes.

Adam Bates was just inside, staring at him. Bates' face was crimson, flecked with white. He said, "Stevens, I don't care what you did to help hide me. I'd be better off dead than the way I am."

Pat frowned. "What the hell you talking about, man?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You're trying to steal Mary from me. I can tell the way you talk to her—and how she talks to you."

Pat's mouth opened and closed. "Adam," he said, "you've done some mighty foolish things since I first saw you in the Palace gambling hall. But this is the craziest thing you've done yet."

"Don't try to put me off," Adam warned, blocking Pat's way. "I know when I've got to fight. I'm giving you warning. You stay away from Mary or you'll settle with me, understand?"

Pat studied him sadly. "I feel sorry for you, Adam. Now stop talking foolish and get out of my way. I'm taking this dress off and after that I don't reckon I'll ever—" He had started to brush past Adam.

Adam caught Pat by the shoulder and half-turned him. "I'm no child. You're not putting me off like this. You're going to promise you'll never speak to her again."

"Son, I reckon you're going to get a lesson taught to you." He took a hard left fist from Adam in the stomach and grunted as it half-knocked the wind out of him. Then, Pat ducked a wild right that Adam threw at him and brought his own right up while the hot-headed Land Prophet was off-balance.

The blow caught Adam Bates flush on the jaw. Slowly he crumbled in a heap against the hump-backed trunk behind him, and from there he slid to the floor.

Pat let him lie there. He slipped off the dress and sunbonnet, put on his own clothes. He picked up his hat and slammed it on his head.

Passing Adam Bates still lying there on the floor as he went out, Pat said, "Next time you keep your head a little cooler or you'll be taking a swing at a man that won't let you get off that easy. Out here they gun daylight through a man for losing his head the way you did."

OUTSIDE, Pat recovered his guns from the Prophet he had lent them to and went to get his bay gelding. Mounting, he turned toward the upper end of the gulch.

As he rode, he glanced back casually at the wagon where they had got the dresses. Adam Bates was just poking his dazed head out of the wagon flaps, watching him, and that made Pat think about Mary Scott. He turned to see her standing by the lead wagon. She waved to him.

Pat took a deep breath and set his eyes ahead of him. "A man can get himself into a heap of trouble, sometimes, by just trying to be nice to folks," he mused.

His eyes swung up to the rimrock where the scout had been watching for Dupree. Two figures sat horses up there. One was red-bearded Ezra and the other was Sam. They watched Pat ride out of camp, and then they turned their horses and rode on out of sight, down the trail from the rimrock to meet him farther on.

* * *

They rode together, the three horsemen, after they met. And Pat told Ezra and Sam what had happened.

"Never saw a man go asking for trouble like you do, Pat," Sam said.

"Pat don't ask for trouble," Ezra remarked. "It just naturally comes to him, don't it, Pat?"

"I seem to get my share," Pat agreed ruefully.

"What I can't figure, Pat," Ezra went on, "how come you didn't tell them Dirt Saints to stand up for their rights and shoot it out with Dupree and his crowd?"

"Sure," Sam seconded. "Why not? Them Dirt Saints would have given Dupree and his men a good fight. It'd been a good sight to watch from up top of the rimrock, too."

"The Saints could have killed Dupree and a heap of his men," Ezra said.

Pat nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe so. On the other hand, if Dupree had won, he'd be swelling around like a poisoned timber wolf. Besides, a lot of the Dirt Saints would have been killed in the fighting. And they seem to be pretty nice folks, most of 'em."

After another long pause, Sam said, "What you figure is our next move?"

"I said before that I'd like it better if you two was to go back to the Lazy Mare and keep anybody from setting fire to the house again. Brice can't fight off everybody alone."

"We'll get back before dark," Ezra said. "Let us ride with you till dark anyway. We ain't had your company for a mighty long time, Pat."

"Anyway," Sam said, "you can tell us what you're figuring on doing even if you don't let us go along."

"I got several things in mind," Pat mused. "But most of all, I'd like to inquire about some of the others in the valley I understand have lost their ranches to Harvey Kelso for taxes."

"You don't have to go far to find somebody else that happened to," Sam Sloan put in. "Your neighboring rancher, John Boyd, has got to leave."

Pat's head turned quickly. "You mean John Boyd's lost his Bar X spread next to me?"

Ezra nodded his great, ugly head solemnly. "He sure did. Says Bull Shard, the sheriff, came up day before yesterday and told him he had four days to get off his place."

Pat thought that over. "That doesn't give him much time beyond day after tomorrow," he said. He put spurs to his bay and the big horse broke into an easy run.

THEY took a roundabout way, over the ridge and along the back of the jack pine growth and came out later in the day behind the old Lazy Mare Ranch. The place looked peaceful. Luke Brice, working in the corral, looked up and waved one of his long arms as the three men rode by across the creek.

"We're going neighbor calling," Pat shouted. "Going over to see how come John Boyd lost his place to Kelso."

They rode on, topped a roll, and could see the Bar X spread. A rangy man of middle age was riding herd on some young stock, hazing them into the corral. He turned, suddenly, upon hearing the clatter of hooves, and one hand dropped to the single gun that he carried.

"Hold your fire," Pat called out. "We're friendly."

John Boyd shielded his eyes from the lowering afternoon sun. He gigged his horse, hurried the cattle into the corral gate and closed it. Then he wheeled and came toward them at a canter.

"Sure glad to see you gentlemen," Boyd said.

"I thought you was some of Kelso's men coming to put me off two days early," Boyd said, earnestly. "That's why I went for my gun when I saw you."

"We know how you feel," Pat sympathized. "We're in the same boat. What happened to you, anyway?"

"About the same thing I hear happened to you," Boyd said. "Only seems like it happened to you when you was away. With me, I was right here and I know darn well I paid those taxes."

"What taxes did he claim you didn't pay?" Pat asked.

"Taxes of two and three years back," Boyd said. "And last year's taxes. It's true I hadn't paid those yet. They wasn't overdue when he foreclosed."

"Seems like if there was a mistake like that," Sam said, "a man should have a right to redeem his place, if he's got the money."

"Got a new law hereabouts," John Boyd said uneasily. "I understand

that if you let your place get sold for taxes, then your time is up and you can't never redeem 'em again."

They paused outside the old ranch house. The roof was bad where some of the tarpaper had been blown off. The sides were brown and weather-worn. But John Boyd looked at it and shook his head and his eyes glistened with tears. "Sure hate to leave it," he said. "It's been a mighty good home to the wife and me."

"Maybe you won't have to lose it," Pat said. "Try to recollect everything about this deal. How come you didn't have your tax receipts of two and three years ago, John?"

Boyd shook his gray head solemnly. "I did have 'em. I'd almost swear it in any court on a stack of Bibles a mile high. I had them receipts just as sure as shooting, but we can't find hide nor hair of 'em now."

"Luke Brice that bought my place tells me there's been a lot of ranch house robberies since I left."

Boyd nodded again. "Sure has. For a long time we laid it to the new folks, miners and such coming into the valley for gold and gambling and one thing and another. But I been thinking it's mighty funny that whenever there's a robbery a man's tax receipts was gone, I began asking other ranchers that had lost their places. And seems like all the tax receipts in the valley had disappeared, or else they never got any in the first place."

"You mean they weren't sure whether they got receipts or not?" Pat demanded.

"Well," John said, "recollecting everything you did and when you did it, two-three years ago, ain't easy for most folks. Special when they don't bother much with bookkeeping."

Pat was thinking hard. "How did you pay your taxes, John? Cash or check?"

"Cash," John said. "Who pays for anything with checks in this country?"

"That's what I figured," Pat said. "I always paid in cash and got a receipt, I think."

Boyd looked hard at him. "You mean you ain't sure you got receipts when you paid your taxes?"

"I'm just trying to remember," Pat said. "I'm trying to figure if I could rightly swear in a court of law that I got a receipt when I paid the taxes on the Lazy Mare."

John Boyd blew out his cheeks. "You see, that's the trouble I been having. Neither my wife nor I could swear in a court that we actual did pay our taxes those two years. And I know this last year we never got to pay them because they wasn't overdue yet for another month."

PAT SAT his horse and pulled on his long chin. "I see your point. If a man can't recollect whether he got a receipt for paying taxes, chances are he couldn't remember any better whether he did pay those taxes or not."

Boyd was staring at him in surprise. "You don't figure it would be possible for everybody in the valley to have forgot to pay his taxes two years ago and the year before that?"

"That's another angle I'm trying to figure," Pat said. He turned to his pals. "You boys don't recollect anything about taxes on the Lazy Mare for those two years, do you?"

Ezra shook his head.

"Pat, I don't know nothing about it at all. But if Sally was here, she'd—" Sam broke off, coughed down at his saddle horn.

Boyd bit his lip and frowned. "In that case, Pat if we can't recollect rightly, we ain't got any way of ever getting our places back."

Pat shook his head. "You're going to get yours back, and so am I. I just remembered something and if I can work it, we'll string that slick little bookkeeper to the nearest cottonwood after he makes the ranches right with their real owners."

"What you talking about?" Ezra demanded.

Sam Sloan was starjng at Pat as if he'd gone suddenly loco. "How you figure to turn that trick?"

"It won't be easy," Pat said. "But I got an idea and if it works and we can get this whole trouble—the Land Prophets and Frank Dupree—quieted down and such, I figure we can carry it off."

"But you just said," Boyd reminded Pat, "That if we couldn't recollect enough to swear in court, there wasn't any way to prove that we was crooked out of our places."

"We got other reasons to figure that Kelso crooked us, though," Pat said. "I know it's circumstantial evidence, but that's all we got to work on. Maybe Kelso never sent out tax bills for those two back years and now he's taking in everybody that forgot to pay without waiting for a bill. Only I got a hunch that ain't the way it was."

"How you figure it was?" Ezra demanded.

"I figure Harvey Kelso jimmied the books so they show we never paid the taxes. Then he'd find out when this ranch family and that one was going to be away from his place for a spell and he'd go out or send somebody. They'd make a clean search of the place. Ranch houses like yours and mine, John, don't take much searching. Even when I had my deed and receipts hid away in a tin box under a floor board beside the fireplace."

"I been figuring the same way," John Boyd said. "And from there I figured he got hold of our receipts, had a tax sale at the back yard of the court house some dark night, and bought our tax-delinquent property without any noise. After that he could send Bull Shard, his sheriff, to give us a few days to get off and then turn around and sell the place to one of the Dirt Saints for a good price. Sure, I figured all that out, but we got no proof."

"That's the point," Pat said. "I've known Harv Kelso for a long time. He's the tightest-fisted single man in the country. And that's what's going to hang him, if my guess is right."

"How?" Sam demanded.

"I can't figure what you're aiming at," John Boyd said.

Pat was looking down the valley trail. He pointed a long arm at a lone rider coming up the trail toward the Bar X. "Who you reckon that is riding this way?"

The other three heads turned. They sat their horses and studied the man riding toward them. They watched him turn in the lane that led to the Bar X house and barn and corral.

EZRA SAID, "He's dressed like one of them miners."

"I don't figure a miner would come up this way for any good," Sam said doubtfully.

"He doesn't set a horse like he was born on one," John Boyd observed.

"There's a funny one," Pat said. "And I reckon that'll stump you all. See anything strange about this one for a rider?"

"Only what we've said," Sam ventured.

"He's got no guns. Unless he's got 'em hid someplace."

The rider turned to follow a twist in the trail. The bony bay he was riding stumbled and he yanked up his head as they turned.

"He's got a bed roll up behind the horse," Ezra said, "It looks mighty like the kind I seen on a couple of miners coming into town looking for work this morning."

The man turned straight again and rode down the lane toward them. He was medium built, small-shouldered.

He raised his right hand in a peaceful gesture, dropped it to his side again, and then reined his horse over, using two hands on the reins, pulled back and said, "Whoa!"

The horse stopped. The man said, "Who's the boss of this ranch?"

"I am," John Boyd said. "For a couple more days. And I dare any man to tell me to get off before."

"Don't look so mad at me," the stranger grinned. "I'm just looking for work of some kind. I'm broke except what I'm sitting on. I'm broke and I got to get a job of some kind."

"You look more like the mining type than a rider," John said. "How come you didn't find work at the mine?"

"I did. I worked there three days up to this noon," The man stopped, studied the surprised looks on the faces of the four men in front of him. "They said we could come back and maybe they'd have some pay for us next week. Mine ain't enough to bother to come back for if I can get

a job someplace else ahead of the rush."

"What rush?" Pat said. "What you talking about, man?"

"The mine," the stranger said. "It's done. I thought you knew. We all got let out this afternoon. There's no more work. All the miners are fighting to get some other kind of work. Kelso, the county clerk, is hiring some as what he calls his deputies. And Frank Dupree, that runs the Palace Saloon and gambling hall and the dance hall, he's hiring miners, too. Seems Kelso and Dupree are getting ready to fight it out and see who's going to be boss around here. That's what I heard talk about in the street just now when I started riding up this way."

13

PAT'S LONG, solid jaw dropped, and he stood staring at the man without seeming to comprehend. "Hold your horses a second," he said. "You trying to say that the gold mining business is closed down and they ain't going to mine no more gold there?"

"That's right. I thought you knew. I figured the news had spread faster than I could get up here. Most everybody in the mines went to town to get some drinks and see what work they could pick up. But me, I figured the quickest way to get a job would be to ride down the valley and see if I couldn't find work of some kind on one of the ranches—like this one, for instance." He looked around the place. "This looks like it could use a ranch hand."

"I'd like mighty well to hire you," John Boyd said, "if it wasn't for any other reason than that you're the one bringing the good news that the mine boom has busted. But, like I say, I'm due to get kicked off my own place in a couple of days and I couldn't take you on for that reason."

"Now wait a minute," Sam said, eyeing the man suspiciously. "Who sent you up here to spread this news about the mine boom busting?"

The man looked surprised. He smiled again, almost laughing. "Are you trying to be funny, mister?"

"This ain't no time to be funny," Sam warned.

"I tell you I came up to look for ranch work because I'm not a gun thrower," the man insisted. "My name's Austin and I come from Ohio. I was raised on a farm. I don't know so much about riding and ranching cattle, but I'd be glad to learn. I like this country here but I don't hold with gun fighting much unless a man's got to. I don't hold with going crazy over pulling a trigger the way some of the out-of-work miners are talking."

"How're they talking?" Pat interrupted. His face was set hard, like a bronze mask.

"They're getting liquored up and talking about shooting up the place," Austin said. "There's been some fights already. There was a fist fight going on in front of the Palace Saloon soon as I came riding past on my way up here."

"Funny thing you three didn't see something of the excitement or hear some of this news," John Boyd ventured

"What with Dupree and his men gunning for Pat," Ezra said, "we struck off through the back country after we left the Saints' camp. We didn't see hide nor hair of anybody that could tell us and we was going around up the other way from the mine so we wouldn't have heard none of the excitement."

"Just what happened at the mine to stop work?' Pat asked.

Austin looked him straight back. "From what they told us, the vein of gold just petered out. I'd noticed that the diggings were pretty lean of the yellow stuff. Noticed it for the last day or so but I don't know anything about mining so I didn't think nothing of it."

"Looks like the mine just run dry," Ezra said. "They'll do that."

"They always do," John Boyd said.

"Gold mines always run dry if you work 'em long enough." He nodded slowly, eyed Sam. "I reckon Austin's telling the truth all right."

"Maybe," Sam said, grudgingly, "Only I'll keep on trying to figure what reason Dupree or Kelso might have for sending for him."

"What I can't figure," John Boyd said, "is why Dupree is hiring miners for his side now. Looks like, if the mine is done and money from that angle is run out, Dupree is half-done with his gambling and drinking place, anyway. What's he want to fight Kelso for now?"

"I'm guessing," Pat answered, "that Dupree's a stubborn fool. He's got drunk with power here in the valley, figured he was going to run things while the mine money was flowing in. So now, come hell or high water, he's going to bull-head through anyway, just to show he can. And worse than that angle, Dupree ain't forgetting what the Land Prophets did to him. A man like Dupree won't forgive getting bested by a bunch of psalm-singing, praying folks that talk peace. He could stand some to take a licking from another tough hombre. But when some nice, simple folks bluff him with their aimed guns and make him toe their line, he's going to get even. And that's what Dupree is hiring more men for. He didn't have enough before. Now he's going to make sure."

"And you figure Kelso's going to fight him." Boyd said.

PAT NODDED his head soberly. "Kelso wants the Saints to stay. They've got money and he wants to sell them more ranches he stole from us. So he's hiring miners to fight on his side and keep Dupree from driving out the Saints."

"Seems a lot of big and bloody fighting to sell some ranches," Boyd ventured.

"It's gone 'way past that stage, I reckon," Pat said soberly. "This is a fight between two power-drunk monkeys, each figuring he's going to show he can come out on top and having the crooked money to back him up. Worst of it is, Dupree'll go up there to the Saints' camp with his men ready to butcher the ones that won't move. And Kelso'll go up there to drive Dupree out of there. And the Land Prohets, the men and their women and kids, they'll be caught in the middle. It ain't going to be a pretty picture. We got to stop it if we can."

"How you figure we can stop it?" Ezra asked eagerly. "You just say the word and I'll lead the fighting, Pat."

"Only one thing I can figure and I sure hate to do that."

"What do you hate to do?" Boyd demanded.

"I always hate to holler for help," Pat said. I'd like a heap better to have us ranchers that have been beat by Kelso, solve this thing alone. And that ranch part of it, I can see how that can be done. But as for stopping the fight, I'm afraid that's a job for the U. S. Cavalry."

Ezra looked west at the afterglow of the sun. "You reckon there's time to go riding to Fort Hackett and bring the Cavalry back before the whole fight's over?"

"That's what I'm trying to decide," Pat said. "If there isn't, then we'll need every man and horse to help the Land Prophets stand up for their rights and keep from getting slaughtered."

Sam jerked his head toward Pat. "Pat's got that elder's daughter on his mind and he can't get her out so he can see any thing else. What you want to fight for the Dirt Saints for to start with, Pat? You know they don't rightly belong in the valley."

"Maybe they do," Pat said. "Anyhow, they pulled up stakes where they was and they come out here expecting to get a fair deal. As a group I don't reckon I ever met a nicer bunch of folks, to get along with, folks that don't have any idea of hurting anybody else. And I aim to see they get as fair a deal as Dutch Springs and Powder Valley can give 'em."

Austin had waited patiently. He spoke up now. "I reckon if I don't get a job here I might as well be riding along down the valley."

"Wait a minute," Pat said. "how

much you know about cattle and horses?"

"Like I say, I was raised on a farm in Ohio. We had cattle and horses there. I took care of them from as long as I can remember."

"We'll need another hand around the Lazy Mare if things get as hot as I believe they're going to get. You go down and tell Luke Brice I said...." Pat paused, glanced toward the Lazy Mare ranch. He gigged his bay, started him off. "On the other hand, come on down with me." He turned back, called to John Boyd. "Don't worry about a thing, John. I reckon you'll be able to keep your place if my little matter of trying to stop the biggest gun fight that ever roared through Powder Valley works out."

Sam and Ezra trailed behind as Austin and Pat led the way toward the Lazy Mare. Pat was silent, trying to think and form his plans. Twice he shook his head and after the last time, Ezra said, "What you got, a bug in your ear? You're shaking your head like a fly-worried bronc."

"I don't like what I'm afraid we got to do. Bringing in Cavalry to settle an argument always brings up other troubles. It's kind of like a kid running home to his old lady when he gets in a fight. And I reckon Dupree's got to be licked by us once and for all."

LUKE BRICE stood in the doorway watching them come. He walked out to meet the four of them, his shotgun held menacingly against possibe intruders.

"You ain't heard the news, I don't reckon," Pat said.

"What news?" Brice asked. He looked tense, desperate, braced for anything that might be coming at him.

Pat told him about the mine, introduced him to Austin. "We can use an honest hand on the Lazy Mare," Pat said. "I told Austin he could stay for a while, anyway till he gets straightened out and we get things settled below."

Luke Brice, nodding soberly, waited silently for Pat to go on.

"Pat ain't figuring Sam and me'll be much good around the ranch while there's fighting to do." Ezra's tone was a little boastful.

"I'm tired of fighting," Brice said, wearily. "We didn't come out to fight." He took a long breath. "How long you figure it'll be before this thing gets settled down, now that the gold mining craze is over?"

"It shouldn't be long," Pat said.

"My wife's getting worse, too," Brice said. "I can't go on like we been going. The ranch won't amount to anything and my wife'll likely die, if this keeps up."

"Anything we can do for her?" Pat asked anxiously. "How about getting old Doc Weaver up here to look at her?"

Brice shook his head slowly. "That wouldn't help as much as having a woman to look after her. Emma's the kind of a woman that needs other women around. If I could get Elder Scott to move the prophets up here, then there'd be a woman or two to look after her.

Pat looked off down the trail again. The speck that he had seen was growing larger, swelling in his vision until it became a buckboard with a team trotting fast before it. And so far as he could make out, a man was driving and there was a woman sitting in the seat beside the man.

"If you figure you need a woman to help take care of Emma," Pat said, "this buckboard coming up the valley may be the answer to your prayer."

They watched the dust cloud rise behind the briskly moving rig. The figures in the buckboard grew larger and suddenly Pat said, "Well, I'll be doggoned!"

Ezra's one eye was fixed on the rig as it turned into the yard. "Hey, that's that Maggie McCabe woman, ain't it?"

"That's Maggie," Pat said. "Wonder what brings her up here in such a rush?"

"Whatever it is," Sam said, "Maggie McCabe won't never be no answer to any man's prayer."

Maggie was looking them over, flashing her eyes about the faces that watched her. She focused on Pat's face and her expression changed from

fear to relief.

"Who's that driving her?" Ezra asked.

"Looks like a livery rig," Pat said. "She must have hired the livery boy to drive her out." He got down and walked over toward Maggie.

Maggie raised her finger to her lips in one quick gesture for silence. She turned to the stable boy who had driven her. "What's my name?" she demanded.

"I told you, lady," the kid said earnestly. "I don't know who you are or care."

"I'll give you an extra dollar for bringing me out," Maggie said. "Now who did you drive down the valley?"

"One of the miners," the kid said. "I just been driving one of the miners down into the ranches to try and get him a job."

"You learned your part real good," Maggie said. "Here's another dollar for you and don't forget what I'm paying you for."

The kid shook his head. "No ma'am. I won't forget. But I'm mighty curious to know who you're running away from."

"For that two dollars extra you can stop being curious. You don't even think about it again. That two dollars is more than you make in a month, almost."

"Yes, ma'am," the kid said. "I stopped thinking. I plumb forgot." He was grinning as he cramped the wheel so she could get out.

Pat was there to help her out of the buckboard. She gave him a thankful halfsmile and sobered instantly. She stood there with her hand in his, the way he'd helped her out. She turned her head and nodded to the boy. "Forget everything, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." The boy swung the team around and started the horses jogging back down the trail.

"What'd you come for?" Sam demanded. "If you come after Pat, you come to the wrong place."

MAGGIE flushed but she didn't say anything.

"Mind your manners, Sam." Pat's voice was menacing. "The lady came to see me, not you."

From inside the house came the voice of Emma Brice. She was calling loudly for Luke, who went in to her.

Maggie shot a quick glance at Pat. "They told me this was your ranch, or used to be. Who's the woman you got up here?"

"I haven't got her up here," Pat said. "It's Luke Brice's wife. She's sick."

"Oh," Maggie said.

Pat waited for her to go on. She turned her head, glanced at Sam and Ezra and Austin, followed Brice with her eyes as he walked into the house, still carrying his shotgun.

She turned back to the three men behind Pat. "Why don't you three take a walk? I want to talk to Pat."

"Come on, Sam," Ezra urged.

Sam shook his head. "I don't go unless Pat tells me to."

"You heard what the lady asked you," Pat said. He liked to see Maggie's face shine when he called her a lady.

"What is it, Maggie?" Pat asked.

The look of fear flashed back in her eyes. "Pat, you got to hide me."

"From who?"

"You mean you won't tell me?"

"I'm not sure. And it wouldn't do any good to go into it."

"That's a queer way to ask favors."

"I know. And I don't deserve help from you—after what I did."

"What did you do?"

"Don't you know? I threatened you and—"

"Telling Dupree where I was going—when I left to go to the Land Prophets' camp?"

She nodded. "That was one reason he went up right off to search for that Dirt Saint that fought for me" Say, I'd like to thank that youngster, whoever he was."

"What was the other reason he went up? To get me, too?"

She nodded. "If you see that Dirt Saint, thank him for me. Dupree says his name is Adam Bates."

"I thought Dupree was gunning for you?"

"I know how to make deals with Dupree when I've got something to offer that he wants."

"Then Dupree isn't the one you're running away from?"

"No." She almost laughed. "Dupree and I are all right now, for the moment."

"Does Dupree know you came up here?"

She shook her head. Her face went a little pale at the mere idea.

"If you and Dupree are so friendly now," Pat said, "why didn't you you go to Dupree and let him hide you?"

"I tell you I wouldn't dare. He'd get it out of me what I'm afraid of." There was stark fear and pleading in her eyes. "Pat, you got to hide me and not let anybody know I'm here."

Pat was watching her, looking down into her anxious, heavily rogued face. He said, "I suppose I do owe you something for taking care of me after Dupree beat me."

"No, you don't owe me nothing." There was a strange light in her eyes. "I took care of you because—because I wanted to, Pat. Don't you see? I know you don't care anything about me—but you're the only one, like I said before. You're the only one that ever treated me like I was a lady. And you're the only one I'd trust to take care of me now that I need hiding."

He glanced at the house and thought of Emma Brice, and her need of a woman was in his mind.

"I'll do anything you say," Maggie pleaded. She shook her head hard and the silver earrings jangled below the lobes of her ears. "Maybe you'd like to know what Dupree plans. I can tell you that if that'll help."

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PAT thought the situation over for a long minute. Then he said, "You can stay, Maggie. As far as I'm concerned, you can stay. You did a good job of nursing on me and maybe you can be of some help to that woman in there. But I'm not Dupree, Maggie. I don't make deals with anybody."

She stood staring at him, amazed and not knowing what to say. A sudden rush of tears welled in her eyes. Then she threw her arms around his neck, kissed him on the cheek.

A gun barked from close range and Maggie cried out and leaped back away from Pat. She grabbed the lobe of her right ear and her hand came away with a speck of blood on it.

She cried out in surprise and rage as Sam Sloan came running up on his short, stocky legs.

The smoking right-hand gun was in his hand. He said, "I know'd what you was aiming at all along, Maggie. Cutting off your right earring is just a warning. Next time I'll aim dead center."

She lowered her head a little, like an animal about to spring, and she crooked her fingers into claws "Why, you little—"

Pat grabbed her and held her from throwing herself at Sam.

"Get out of here, Sam," Pat barked "I'm old enough to take care of myself. And if I ever catch you drawing a gun on any woman again, I'll—"

"I was only doing it for your good, Pat," Sam insisted. "You got to have protection from her kind. She ain't a fit—"

"Shut up! Get back to the bunkhouse and don't let me see you until the supper bell rings."

Pat slapped his horse on the rump and ran him toward the corral. He turned to Maggie. "You can have my room and I'll sleep in the bunkhouse." He picked up her broken earring, gave it to her.

She looked up at him and away. Then, as he pushed the side door of the ranch house open for her, she said, "How about letting me do the cooking while I'm here? You can tell anybody that comes around that I'm your cook."

An hour later all hands learned that Maggie McCabe could cook.

Sam ate silently, but Ezra praised the food loudly. When they were all through, Brice took Maggie in to see his wife while Pat and the boys cleaned up the dishes.

Pat wrung out the dish cloth when

they'd finished and looked out through the kitchen window at the dark night. "I reckon this would be a good time to do the little job I got to do," he said.

"Such as what?" Sam demanded.

"Putting my hunch into motion."

"You're taking us with you," Ezra said, "if you're figuring on doing something dangerous."

Pat shook his head. "This is a one-man job, only."

A shadow appeared in the doorway to the sitting room. Maggie stood there taking everything in. "Maybe if I tell you Dupree's plans, it'll change yours." There was concern on her face. She jerked her head toward the front door.

Pat dried his hands and followed her outside.

She faced him in the darkness. "I don't know what you're planning to do, Pat, but I'm guessing it won't be anything very safe to your hide. So I'll tell you what Dupree said he was going to do. He's hiring miners that got put out of the mines when the gold ran out and he expects to get them ready to ride by dawn or just before. He's planning to attack the Dirt Saints, with the town marshal leading them. He's got a legal eviction order from the judge, he says, and if they don't get out, then they can stay and get shot down."

PAT STOOD tense and silent in dark, waiting for Maggie to go on.

"He's mighty mad about the way they hid this Adam Bates. And he's going to get even with Elder Scott for showing him up before those gun fighters."

"Kelso'll have his men there, I reckon," Pat said soberly. "And there will be lots of good folks killed in the gun fighting."

"Kelso's men won't be there," she said, almost in a whisper. "Frank's given out orders that he attacks the Saints in three days. Kelso's taking his time. He knows that Dupree's served a notice on the Saints that they got to get out in three days, but he doesn't know about the eviction order or that Dupree aims to get going right away."

"That's mighty interesting," Pat said. "I reckon I'd better get started on my plan without wasting any more time."

"There's one more thing I overheard Frank Dupree telling Dan Kenyon, his marshal," Maggie said. "He's figuring on getting Kelso at his house before daylight. I heard him say he's sent two men to get him by four in the morning. I couldn't catch the name of one of the gun fighters but the other one he called Ringo."

"Gurky and Ringo?"

"They're the ones."

"That's going to be a heap of help to me," Pat said. "Now you go back and sit tight and tell the boys, if they ask, that I've gone on a little errand and I'll be back when I get here."

She turned, glanced at the house and faced him again under the cottonwood. "Pat, be careful?"

"Don't worry about me." He drew first one gun and then the other, spun the cylinders and worked the action to make sure that everything would be in order.

He got his bay gelding, saddled him and led him silently out of the corral and over the short-cut to the lower trail. There, he mounted and rode by the shortest route toward Dutch Springs.

"One thing we got to do," he told the bay. "If we don't do anything else, we got to keep Harvey Kelso alive long enough to do us some good."

* * *

Pat had looked over Harvey Kelso's new home going through Dutch Springs. It was a big house, painted white and standing on a slight knoll overlooking the city. Harvey Kelso had never married. Once he had boarded with Mrs. Decker over on Aspen Street, but things were different now.

The house stood out stark and bare in the darkness of the night. Pat rode around it at a distance, looked it over and then tied his horse to a juniper tree and started for the house on foot.

There were clumps of mesquite bordering the lawn, and he kept to

the brush, moving slowly, watching for signs of guards about the house.

"That Harv Kelso's a pretty smart little gent and he's easy scared," Pat breathed. "I don't reckon he'd go to sleep without having somebody watching for his safety."

He reached the last clump of brush and crouched there, hands resting on his guns, waiting.

IT WAS past midnight and there were no lights burning in the house. There was a porch across the front and he watched that. But it was so dark that he couldn't make out any figures on the porch or in the low shrubs below.

After ten minutes of waiting and seeing nothing, he began moving cautiously across the grass lawn. His boots made slight swishing sounds, and he could feel the coolness of the heavy dew that clung to his feet.

Still nothing stirred and he moved on, reached a low tree in the lawn and paused there. Then, ahead of him, he heard a sound. A foot had scraped on the porch flooring.

Someone had been watching him all along.

He was more than halfway to the house now, and it was too late to turn back. He was here for for a special purpose and he was going to get what he had come after or find out why not.

Pat gave his wide, black hat-brim a yank so that it covered his face more completely. Then he stepped boldly out from under the tree and strode toward the porch.

The scuffing of a boot sounded again. Then another boot clumped low on the porch floor boards and a figure stood up and came down the steps to meet him.

"Reach your hands high," the voice said, low.

At the distance of ten feet the man seemed young. He was slim and the hat that he wore was punched back off his forehead. He had his hands on his guns but he hadn't lifted them out of their holsters. He had the same confident air of the cocky young gun slinger that had been with Bull Shard in Kelso's office.

Pat kept his head down. He didn't go for his guns. He let his arms hang free and he tried to shape up what he was going to say in the next second allowed him.

"What you doing here and who are you?"

Now Pat recognized the voice. It was Paso.

There were several ways Pat could say what he had to. He could tell Paso that Bull Shard had told him to come. Or he might say Bull Shard was expecting him. What he said would all depend on how closely he could guess whether Bull was there at the house or not.

The least damage would be done, Pat decided, if he used the first explanation. He kept his voice to a low mumble. "Bull Shard told me to come."

Paso looked harder at him, tried to see under the hat.

"Bull's inside asleep. How do I know you're not lying?"

That was a break. Pat said, "Sure. I know Bull's here. Didn't he tell you he was expecting me to come and relieve you?"

"He didn't tell me nothing like that." The soft, low voice was defiant.

Pat moved closer. Now he stood within three feet of the bottom step where Paso was standing. "Take a good look," Pat said. "See if you don't recognize me. No use waking up Bull if he's asleep."

He was moving closer, cautiously, as he talked. But he tried to move with assurance, too, as if he fully expected that Paso would recognize and welcome him.

Paso leaned to have a close look in the dark. His hands relaxed on his gun belts. He opened his mouth to speak.

Pat became a wild, human dynamo of violence.

HIS LEFT fist swung and connected, and he swung his right as Paso went for his guns. He swung that right with all the power he had and it connected too. There was a

low smack, solid but muffled as the big fist smashed against Paso's bony jaw.

The young gun fighter's legs buckled. His head sagged over and his body went limp. Then he collapsed like a falling bag of cattle feed and sprawled on the grass below the step.

Pat took off his neckerchief and wound it about the butt of his right-hand six-gun. He gave Paso two strokes on the base of his skull to make sure he'd stay out long enough.

Then he stood up, listened for sounds that would warn him his actions had been heard.

From inside the house came a steady sound. It began to grow in volume until it was a low snort. Then the steadiness of it continued in a deeper tone.

Pat crept up the porch steps on the toes of his boots, scarcely breathing. He reached the partly open door, swung it wide and slipped into the black interior.

The gun with the neckerchief padding it was in his hand. Like a slowly advancing shadow, he moved closer to the sound of the steady, labored snoring.

It was difficult to see anything inside. He stumbled over a chair. It fell with a clatter, and Pat stood frozen, waiting, listening.

As the chair hit the floor the labored breathing stopped. Now there was deep silnce in the room, and a darkness that was almost completely black.

Walking on his toes, he moved closer. Now he was near enough to make out Bull's body and head and big legs sprawled over the couch. He was lying on his side, with his face away from Pat, the back of his head exposed.

"I sure hate to do this," Pat breathed. "It's like shooting a man in the back, but this ain't no time for playing grandstand heroics like Adam Bates. We got more important things at stake."

He swung the padded gun butt, swung it light at first to try the pressure and the swing. Then, as Bull began to rouse from the first, easy blow, he let him have it hard and firm and stunning.

Bull Shard's big body clumped on the couch and settled to what seemed a more comfortable position.

Pat turned and started up the stairs. Kelso, he thought, would be in the biggest bedroom upstairs. That was the one over the porch.

HE REACHED the upper story, still walking on his toes, paused at the closed door of the front bedroom, then opened it softly.

There was silence for a long moment, then the sound of bed springs creaking, then silence again.

There was a lighter space framed in each window from the stars outside. He could see a form move, silhouetted against the right-hand window. The body was small, about the size of Harvey Kelso. And now Pat could see that Kelso was lying in his bed, but turning over and rising on one elbow.

Kelso's voice spoke, low. "Is that you, Bull?" And when Pat didn't answer, Kelso raised his voice. "Paso. Is that you, Paso?"

A light flared and Kelso held the match toward a lamp beside his bed. He was sitting up and his other hand held a gun. It was pointed at the door where Pat stood.

Pat had stepped back beside the door frame as the light flared and his guns came out—the one with the neckerchief around the stock and his left-hand gun. "I wouldn't make a fuss, Kelso," he said softly.

The light went out instantly. He heard the bed creak and then a body thumped on the floor behind it.

"You're late with that trick, Kelso. Come out with your hands up before I blast you under the bed or through the mattress. Take your choice."

There was silence. Then a moment later, Harv Kelso said querulously, "Where—where's Bull and Paso?"

"They won't bother us," Pat said. "You know who this is? Recognize my voice?"

"Stevens. Pat Stevens?"

"You had a pretty good idea I'd come after you eventually, didn't you, Kelso?"

There was more sound of movement. "I thought we had you bluffed."

"I don't bluff for long. Come on out before I blast you. I'm going to start counting to three. Four pulls the trigger."

"Don't hurry your count," Kelso said. "I'm in a bad position here back of the bed. It'll take me a little time."

"It'll help your living if you slide your gun across the floor so I can hear it."

There was silence again. Seconds ticked by before Kelso said, "Here comes my gun, Pat. I'm shoving it across the floor."

There was the sound of something hard sliding across the floor, under the bed from the far side.

"Sorry," Kelso said. "It didn't go far enough to get on the other side of the bed."

"You're a smart little squirt," Pat said. "But like I say, you'll keep healthier if you stop trying tricks."

"Tricks?" Kelso was trying to sound surprised.

"Tricks," Pat repeated. "I can tell the difference between your shoe sliding across under the bed and your gun."

Another long pause, and then Kelso said, "All right. You're too sharp for me, Pat. Here comes my gun."

There came the genuine clatter of iron on wood. It slid across from under the bed and came to Pat near the doorway where it stopped.

"Now light a light," Pat ordered.

In the flare of the match Pat saw Kelso standing behind the bed. "What do you aim to do, Pat? You haven't got any case against me. What I did was legal and aboveboard."

"I said light a light. Touch that flame to the lamp beside your bed, Kelso."

Kelso lifted the lamp chimney. He touched the flame to the wick, bent down to adjust it.

Pat stretched upright in the doorway, and his tall frame filled it. Returning his left-hand gun to its holster, he watched Kelso closely.

Slowly Kelso put the chimney back on the lamp, bent down and adjusted the wick again. His left hand was shaking. Pat could see that from where he stood. He could see his left hand but he couldn't see the right.

Suddenly, Harvey Kelso moved with lightning speed. He spun round as his right hand came out from under one of his bed pillows.

When he brought his right hand around it had another gun in it. It gleamed in the flickering flame of the lamp.

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STEVENS had half-suspected a move like that. Harvey Kelso had been taking too much time lighting the lamp. And his left hand had been shaking with the suspense that he felt.

As the gun came around in Kelso's hand, Pat was upon him, clubbing with his tight-hand gun, and twisting the right wrist that held Kelso's second gun.

Kelso gave a groan. It wasn't loud. Pat struck him again, but not as hard as he had finished off the other two. The county clerk stiffened and fell across the bed.

Pat ran his eyes over the room. There was a large charcoal drawing in a big frame against the end wall of the bedroom. He walked over and lifted it from the wall. There was nothing behind it but bare wall.

He turned to another picture and another. It was the same behind those. He glanced at the busily clicking clock on the mantel. It was after one o'clock. There wasn't any time to be wasted. He'd have to get over to the Saints' camp before he finished his job, and warn them of the attack that was to come at dawn.

Pat came back to the bed and began tearing off the sheets with which he intened to bind Kelso. Then, he stood looking at a dark space in the wall behind the bed.

Wheeling out the bed disclosed a wall safe that the bed hid when it

was rolled back in place.

He studied the face of it with the big combination dial and then tried the lever. It was locked. He made a few passes at the combination, but the tumblers wouldn't fall into place properly. Finally, his mind made up, he turned to Kelso.

A pitcher of water was in the heavy washbowl on the stand. Pat picked it up and poured some of the liquid on Harvey Kelso's bare head. And when that didn't revive him, he let him have the whole thing full in the face.

Kelso blew and stretched back on the bed. He fought the wetness about him, groaned and rolled and opened his eyes, staring up at Pat. "What happened?"

"It ain't what has happened," Pat warned. "It's what's going to happen to you if you don't open that safe in the wall there."

Kelso's face went pale. He said, "I —I've lost the combination."

"That's the biggest lie you ever told. You never lost anything. That's what makes me think you've still got those tax receipts you stole from us ranchers. You never threw away anything, Kelso. And that's what's going to trip you up."

"If you want that safe opened," Kelso said, "you'll have to open it yourself."

"I reckon I will then," Pat agreed. "But it'll be a second-handed opening. I'm going to open it through you."

Kelso looked scared. His eyes shot to Pat's guns.

"No," Pat said, shaking his head. "I'm not going to threaten you with guns. I'm going to beat you with these bare hands of mine until you either get to be a hunk of ground-up red, bloody hog flesh or you make up your mind to remember that combination and open the safe."

Kelso glanced at the lamp beside the bed. He made a sudden lunge for it, and missed.

Pat's long arm shot out. His hand snatched Kelso by the collar of his nightshirt and yanked him back. He spun the man around and crashed a fist to his jaw.

"Now, you evil little squirt," Pat gritted. "Get some clothes on pronto unless you want to be paraded all over this county you claim to run, with nothing but a nightshirt on."

Kelso stood swaying dizzily for an instant. Alternately his face flashed crimson and white. And when he spoke, the words were venomous. "You'll die for this, Stevens."

"You're not in any position to threaten anybody right now," Pat said.

"I've got a hundred men hired to protect me and my interests."

"But they don't come to work this early in the morning. And I'd hate to see what they're going to do to you when they find out the man that hired them hasn't got the money to pay them what he promised."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's going to take every last cent you can dig together to satisfy the ranchers you've cheated so they don't plan a necktie party for you."

"You've got no proof," Kelso said. He was pulling on his pants as he said it. He tried to look unconcerned, sure of himself. And for a split second, Pat wasn't very sure that he was getting anywhere. Not until he saw that sudden, sidelong glance at the safe in the wall. Then, he knew. Then, he was sure that he had guessed right, and the knowledge spurred him to faster action.

"Now you got your pants on," Pat said, "you can open that wall safe."

"I told you I'll never open that safe."

Pat reached for him, caught him by his neck and drew him closer. "Kelso, I'm about to do something that I reckon will be the most satisfying experience of my life. I'm going to cuff you so silly you won't have enough sense, ever, to remember any number, to say nothing of a combination."

KELSO stood, his eyes bulging with sudden fear, his teeth clinched. Suddenly, he threw his left fist and it landed on Pat's jaw. There was power behind the blow—more power than Pat had dreamed Kelso could produce.

For an instant the stars winked about him. He felt himself going backward. His head slammed against the wall and he felt himself sliding down into darkness.

Kelso was all over him, pounding him with his fists, a wild desperation driving the fists hard into vital spots.

Against the blows, Pat rallied, got himself up off the floor and tried to duck under the blows. He threw his punches wild because his dazed head wouldn't let him see clearly in the lamp light. And when he couldn't land a blow, he grabbed Kelso and spun him about in his strong arms.

Kelso was gouging, kicking, beating him.

A wild right of Pat's landed and the thrill of contact rippled up his right arms. He felt Kelso going down before him and he caught the man by the front of his undershirt and brought him close. Then he slapped him with the palm of his hand, slapped him until the room echoed with the whacks.

Kelso struggled frantically to break away, but his shirt held and Pat beat him with his stinging fingers, bashing him back and forth with all his might.

Kelso was panting like a running dog, and pleading. He said, "All—right—I'll do what—you say, Stevens. Stop this—"

Pat cuffed him once again for good luck and dragged him over to the safe and slammed him down in front of it. "Now open that and make it fast."

"Step over out of my light," Kelso panted. "I can't see the dial good."

"You can see good enough," Pat said. But he went back a step and watched Kelso work. He could see his back and his hands working on the dials, turning them first to the right and then to the left.

There was a pause. Pat could hear the tumblers click inside the safe. Kelso hesitated, like a man about to sign his own death sentence. His back was heaving with his heavy breathing. He waited, leaning against the wall, as if he were about to faint.

"What's the matter with you?" Pat said.

"I can't get my breath."

"You don't need any. Turn that knob and open the safe door. You got it unlocked."

Kelso was leaning against the wall and puffing. He said, "I'm dizzy. I think I'm going to faint."

"You'll die if you don't open that door," Pat said.

Kelso nodded. "Very well." He heaved on the handle, turned it. Suddenly the door was flung open.

Harvey Kelso could move fast because he was small and had little weight to throw around. He turned now and his hand came out of the safe with a gun in it.

"Now it's my turn," he said, savagely. "You'll never see the day that you're smart enough to take over from Harvey Kelso."

PAT LOOKED at the small gun. It had an ivory butt, and a short, thick muzzle. The hole in it would let a bullet out big enough to kill Pat in one shot if it hit him in a vital spot.

"Back, Stevens," Kelso ordered. "Or do you want to get it straight in the middle at close range?"

Pat's hands slowly raised over his guns.

"Bring them on up above your shoulders."

"They're coming," Pat said. He kept watching the gun in the man's hand. Then he glanced past it, at the safe. The inside of the safe seemed to be stacked full with papers and bundles of money. Pat nodded at the contents. "Reckon you had everything ready to leave quick if you got cornered. You must have enough money in there to take you to the moon."

"You didn't honestly think you were going to get away with this, did you, Stevens? You didn't know that I figured every angle before I started in this business."

"Reckon I under-rated you, Kelso. You got more tricks up your sleeve than a magician." Pat nodded at the small, snub-nosed gun that he held. "But you can't never be sure of them guns you leave shut up in safes for

a year or so. Sometimes if they're left laying around loaded too long, they don't go off when you want 'em to."

"Want me to try this one right now on you?" Kelso sneered. He moved his finger to pull the trigger. But he didn't complete the movement, and in order to make sure, he moved with his back to the doorway so that he could leap backward and run if the gun should fail him.

"You're in enough trouble as it is now," Pat said. "You're likely to get jailed for swindling the ranchers out of their places. But if you was to shoot me in cold blood, it would be murder, too."

"Shooting a thief in self-defense in your own house isn't murder," Kelso said. "Besides, there wouldn't be any proof."

Something creaked below in the house. The faint sound came to Pat's ear, but Kelso didn't seem to notice.

He moved a half-step to the side. From there, he could dive behind the walnut foot of the bedstead and have some slight protection if gunfire began booming from the hall.

Kelso said, "Another move like that and I'll shoot. I don't know why I bother to let you live this long."

"I suppose you figure that killing me would blot out any chance there'd be of you getting what's coming to you. Don't think I'm the only rancher that knows you well enough to figure out your little game and where you'd be likely to keep even evidence that would convict you."

Kelso glanced at the open safe. He took a half-step toward it, and then he stopped short. "You've given me a good idea, Stevens. I'll give you ten seconds to make your last prayer."

"I'll need longer than that," Pat said, stalling. "Because I'll want to say a prayer for your ornery soul, too. And that takes a lot of saying."

He heard another board creek below. "You better not stop me from praying for your cussed soul, Kelso, because there won't be many kind enough to do that for you."

"Shut up!" Kelso barked. Now he was listening too.

Pat straightened, tried to appear confident. "You didn't figure I'd come here alone, did you, Kelso?"

IN THE doorway Kelso bent a little. His eyes shifted uneasily, and Pat knew he wanted to look away but didn't dare.

"All right, Stevens," he said. "You'll have to go. I'm not taking any chances of being shot in the back."

Kelso raised the pistol and his finger flexed on the trigger.

Pat dived below his aim. The gun barked once. But the house echoed to two shots.

Pat could feel a burning sensation in his back. He was flat on his face on the floor, his guns out, ready to fire.

Kelso reeled in the doorway. His left hand was holding the right wrist. His right-hand fingers were stretched out and two of them were dripping blood.

The gun that Kelso had fired was lying at the side of the room against the wall where the shot from the hall had slammed it. And the full-throated voice of Ezra was saying, "Sure hope I didn't hit you, Pat. I tried not to."

Ezra came in then, squinting his one eye in the dim light of the lamp. He stared at Pat's back, said, "Jumping horn toads, Pat. You been shot in the back. You got blood coming out of you."

Kelso turned as if to run, but Pat was watching him. "I wouldn't go if I was you," Pat said calmly.

Kelso froze. "I'm bleeding," he whimpered, and he was trembling.

"You'll bleed a heap more if you don't decide to behave yourself," Ezra warned. "Pat, you keep an eye on the varmint and let me look at your back.'

Pat lay still with his belly against the floor and kept his guns on Kelso in the doorway. He flinched as Ezra swabbed off his wound with water and a towel. "How deep is it? Feels like it's clear to my gizzard."

"Just a nick," Ezra assured him. "But it'll be sore for a while. The blood's stopping good."

"I'm sorry I didn't kill you," Kelso muttered.

"It wasn't your fault you didn't," Pat said. "I wouldn't feel bad about it?"

"I'd feel mighty good I didn't if I was you," Ezra said. "If you'd drilled Pat, square on, you'd be lying dead as any man ever died. I'd of blow'd your heart into a thousand pieces."

"Got my back cleaned up now?" Pat asked.

"Reckon so," Ezra replied. "Hey, you didn't figure you could get away from me clean, did you, Pat?"

"I hoped to, but I'm sure glad you followed along. Nobody but you could have tracked me here in the dark."

"You didn't make it too easy for me. It's black as a dance-hall girl's heart outside and darker yet inside here." He paused, helped Pat to his feet.

Pat flexed his back muscles.

"It'll be sore for a spell," Ezra repeated, "but it won't kill you, I don't reckon." He nodded to Kelso. "What you figuring on doing with that?"

"See how bad his fingers are hurt," Pat said. "Hey, Kelso, is that your writing hand he shot the gun out of?"

"Yes," Kelso said. "Why?"

"Nothing for now." Pat jerked his head toward Kelso. "Sit him down, Ezra, and see if you can bind up them fingers so they'll be all right. They look just skinned a little on the ends."

Pat stood by while Ezra settled Kelso in a chair and proceeded to tear up one of the bed sheets. He had his wound done up in no time. "Now what we going to do with him?"

"You're going to take him to the Lazy Mare ranch," Pat said. He glanced at Kelso. "I've got some special riding to do, then I'll come on up that way."

Kelso turned, glanced at the open safe, looked away quickly.

"You go ahead with him," Pat said to Ezra. "I'll be down and heading off for a ride. See you later."

Ezra jabbed Kelso with one of his guns. "Get moving, you!"

PAT HEARD them going down the stairs. He turned to the wall safe, began cleaning out the neat bundles of currency and the other papers. There was one bundle of papers lying on the bottom of the safe under everything else. Something about those pale blue slips of paper seemed familiar. He ran through them.

Soon he stood staring at his own tax receipts of two and three years back on the Lazy Mare. And there were tax receipts of many others. He found John Boyd's among them.

He made a sack out of a pillow case that he took off Kelso's pillow, stuffed everything into it and went out into the hall.

He walked down the steps on his toes and crossed the lawn to his big bay in the mesquite. He untied him from the juniper tree and forked him. His back wasn't bothering him much.

He rode off up toward the dry gulch where the Dirt Saints had their camp to warn them that Dupree was coming at dawn.

The night was cool and where there had been many clouds around midnight, now the skies had cleared and stars hung from the arch of the sky like gold balls from a dome.

He cursed softly, saying, "Why in hell does a man have to be so darn greedy he wants to run everything there is to run?"

He turned up the dark gulch trail. The bay picked his way in and out of the Conestoga wagon ruts as the hill began hemming in the gulch, making it darker.

Pat raised his eyes. He should be seeing those canvas tops on the wagons in the circle by now. But there were none in sight.

"Maybe I'm not far enough along to see 'em yet," he reasoned.

He stood up in his stirrups. The whole place ahead of him looked bare and unfamiliar.

He reined his horse to the right track rut and stood up again, his eyes staring into the blankness before him. He could see across the gulch, the full length and breadth of it, and there was nothing there. Nothing but square dots that were boxes, emptied

of provisions, that had once been part of the camp of the Land Prophets.

But there was no other evidence that a living soul had been there, and there were none in sight now.

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IT WAS difficult to believe that a whole camp could have cleared out so completely. He sat his horse and stared at the vacancy of it all. At last he rode on into the deserted place, rode in a small circle and then put spurs to the bay and sent him off through the gap again and down the wagon ruts.

The stars were even brighter than they had been before, he could see pretty well from the light they made. The wagon tracks turned off to the right before they came within a half-mile of Dutch Springs. They turned off into the open prairie and headed off in a familiar directon.

The horse moved faster. Pat leaned in the saddle, tried to see ahead. But the country rolled so that he couldn't look more than a few miles without a hill rising before his vision.

He moved the bay into a run. They crested the next hill and still the wagon tracks moved on through the valley, straight for the Lazy Mare ranch.

The light of day was coming in the east, and when he topped a low ridge he could see far ahead. There he got his first glimpse of the wagons. They were forming now in a circle and the circle was around the ranch house and corral and barn of the Lazy Mare ranch as if the buildings were the hub of a huge wheel.

From the ridge he could get a good view of the whole valley. Far back where the dust cloud of the wagons had formed and died there was a new cloud forming in the early morning. It rose like a storm with a tail, and the tail lashed back down Main Street to its beginning at the Palace Saloon.

Pat tried to count the specks of riders that swarmed toward the gulch. He'd guess there were a hundred or more. That would be Frank Dupree and his men, going to take their vengeance against the Land Prophets.

"They'll sure be disappointed when they get to the gulch," Pat said aloud. "They'll be disappointed and mad as hornets. Then they'll come tracking the wagons to see where they've gone.

He dug spurs deep into the horse and raced up the valley, heading for the nearest ranch house. He hauled rein before it, yelling, "If you want to help all the ranchers get a square deal, bring your guns and come riding to the Lazy Mare ranch."

Cy Weatherell stuck his head out a bedroom window, called out, "That you, Pat? I'll be coming."

"And stop at any of the places that have lost or are maybe going to lose their places," Pat said. "Tell 'em to hurry. I got a way of getting back the ranches that us cattle men lost But you got to come and make sure we got strength enough to do the trick."

"I'll do her," Cy yelled. "Count on me."

Pat swung his bay over to the other side of the valley to warn the ranchers there. He stopped at the Box K and the Lazy D and the others on the way. There was little time to explain. He had only to get the men there before Dupree and his gang could find they'd been cheated in the gulch and ride to the Lazy Mare.

Young Adam Bates challenged him as Pat put the gelding through the nearest space between the wagons. He waved at Bates, shouted, "Where is Elder Scott at, Adam? I got to see him right quick."

Adam turned his two guns on him. "Wait right there," he said. "Who you want to see, Scott or his daughter?"

Pat whirled on him. "When you going to learn you got to forget personal jealousies when you're having a war on?"

He turned his back on Bates, searched the wagons for the Scott outfit, and found it three wagons down. Mary was waving to him. She came running.

"I'm glad you're back," she said.

"I'm sure glad you all are here at Lazy Mare ranch instead of up the gulch," Pat said. "Who told you to come here?"

"I don't know," she said. "We began moving very secretly as soon as it was dark. We came the back way."

A crowd had gathered about Pat, and a tall, young man said, "What's this you're talking about, having a war on?"

Suddenly, Elder Scott appeared from between two of the wagons. "I overheard you mention war, Stevens. What do you mean?"

"It'll come as soon as Dupree's men can ride up here," Pat said.

"But we left the gulch camping ground and came up here to get out of war," Scott said.

"Only you don't know Dupree," Pat said.

Maggie McCabe was suddenly at Pat's elbow. "You're right they don't know Frank Dupree. I've known him off and on for years and he's the—" She broke off short. "Pat, darlin'. You've got yourself hurt."

Mary Scott's eyes blazed. She stared at the McCabe woman, at her rouged face and red lips. "Who's this woman?" she said icily.

"This is Maggie McCabe," Pat said. "Maggie, this is Mary Scott."

The two women looked at each other. Mary gave her a short, vaguely polite nod. Maggie turned and pulled up Pat's shirt in the back. "Let me take a look at this. Looks like a bullet crease."

MARY'S face grew crimson. She turned away and ran toward her wagon.

"Come over to the house so I can get you patched up and keep the dirt out," Maggie said. "And I'll bet this undershirt you got hasn't been washed in a week. You need somebody to look after you, Pat."

She took his arm. He moved with her and Elder Scott who came along, his long legs striding out beside Pat.

"Who tipped you off that Dupree was coming at dawn?" Pat asked.

The elder glanced at Maggie. He said, "This is entirely a secret matter, Stevens. It should remain a secret."

Pat's mind flashed backward. A judge had issued the order. One of Dupree's appointees, likely. But some clerk in the court that had issued the order, might have slipped out the information.

"I reckon that's the first good deed Harv Kelso's done in a cow's age," Pat said, watching Scott's face.

Elder Scott glanced at him quickly, and coughed.

Maggie took him into the house and Elder Scott came in with them. Ezra met them at the door. He said, "Sure glad you got back all right."

"Maybe you think I ain't glad, too." Sam said, coming forward.

"If you was so careful of Pat's health, how come it was only me that sneaked out and tracked him down and saved his life while you was sleeping?" Ezra sneered.

"I already told you a hundred times," Sam said. "You're better at tracking. And besides, you sneaked out without me knowing and—"

"Quiet, boys. You're acting like a couple of sheep dogs trying to wag your tails hardest around me when I come home. What you want me to do, pat you behind the ears. Where's Harvey Kelso?"

"We got him locked up good and tight," Ezra said. "And tied to the bed, too."

"Get him loose and bring him in here. We're going to start making out deeds and have signings right fast," Pat said. "Sam you go out and meet the ranchers as they pour in Make sure they're the real ranchers. You know all the old ones. Make sure they ain't ringers that maybe Dupree has planted in the valley."

Sam shot a venomous glance at Ezra's broad back as he went out to the back room. He gave Pat a short, grateful nod and went out on the run.

"Sit down on this bench," Maggie said. "And hold still. I got some court plaster I'm going to stick some bandage on with so you won't get that bullet crease more infected than it is."

While she worked, Elder Scott talked. "I don't understand how Dupree can have any excuse to come up here and start a fight."

"Dupree don't ever need an excuse to fight," Maggie said. "He thrives on it so long as the winning is on his side."

"Dupree's coming up here to get even with you for besting him yesterday," Pat said.

"Never a man was born that could hold a grudge as hard or as long" Maggie said.

"But are you sure he's coming up here?" Scott insisted.

"As sure as I can be of anything," Pat replied. "Look here." He half-turned to face Scott.

MAGGIE yanked his arm. "Turn around the other way. How can I get this plaster stuck on you if you keep wiggling like a worm in a griddle?"

"I saw Dupree and his men starting for the gulch this morning just as it was getting daylight," Pat said. "I'd say there was a hundred men, more or less. He's been hiring miners that got let out of the mine."

"I know," Scott said solemnly. "And you think when he finds we've gone, that he'll come up after us?"

"He'll be madder than a wet wildcat. He'll come tracking your wagons to see where you went. And when he gets part way here, he'll know that the wagons are here at the Lazy Mare ranch. And that'll make him all the madder. He'll have his miners liquored up for a fight. They was starting from the saloon this morning that way, I'd guess. And you get a hundred-odd men liquored up for blood, they ain't going to be satisfied with a peppermint stick."

Elder Scott's face was pale. He rose slowly. "In that case, there is no time to lose. I'll tell my men to man their guns."

"And if you got any guns left, you tell them to give 'em to your women that can shoot."

Elder Scott bowed his head and turned. He stepped aside while Ezra came in bringing Harvey Kelso. "Here's that dirty crook," Ezra said. "We figuring on hanging him now or later?"

Kelso was white-faced and shaky. He said, "Pat, you've got to listen to me. I swear, I'm not all bad."

"You figure warning the Land Prophets that Dupree had got out an order for them to move is enough to clear you of everything else?"

Kelso turned on Scott. "I thought you were a man of your word, Elder Scott."

"He never told me," Pat said. "I guessed and tossed it at you and you bounced it back at me."

Elder Scott bowed to Pat. "Thank you for exonerating me."

Sam Sloan crowded into the room excitedly. "Pat, I got the ranchers here, what's come already. Where you figure to hang Harvey Kelso?"

Kelso was like a ghost. His eyes turned from one angry rancher's face to the next as they crowded into the room.

"Well, that depends," Pat said.

"Listen to me, men," Kelso said jerkily. "I admit I did wrong. But I'll make everything right. I swear I will."

Maggie had left after bandaging Pat's back. Now he got up to tuck his shirt in his trousers, saying, "You're geting so big-hearted you'll make me cry, Kelso. But since you're so eager about making things right again, we'll help you. First off, I figure you'll want to pay back the Land Prophets that bought land from you." Pat raised his voice. "Luke Brice. Come here!"

Brice came in and Pat said, "Luke, you go get your deed and sign over the papers deeding the place to me and I'll pay you six thousand dollars." Pat dumped the pillow case contents onto the table before him.

Ranchers gathered about, looked at the papers and the bundles of money. An angry rumble of voices rose in the room. "I got this stuff out of Harvey Kelso's personal safe behind his bed," Pat said. "Reckon all your stolen receipts for taxes are here."

He began reading off the names

and handing out the stolen receipt slips.

Kelso stood motionless, the muscles in his neck twitching. Pat turned to him, "You're going to be real busy for some time. Sit down across the table and start making out deeds of these places so you can deed 'em back. It happens there was some pads of blank deeds in this bundle of papers I took from your safe. It'll save you some trouble copying."

Luke Brice came in with his deed, said, "I drawed up another one just like this and signed it. There's two witnesses to it."

Pat paid him six thousand dollars out of the piles of money, took the signed deed to the Lazy Mare ranch and stuck it in his pocket.

The payment went on. Kelso was working feverishly, filling in deeds and signing them back in spite of his sore fingers, tryng to make things right with the ranchers as they stood over him menacingly.

Maggie came hurrying into the room from upstairs. She came over to Pat, bent low, whispered in his ear. "They're coming. I can see their dust cloud from the upstairs window."

"Thanks," Pat said. "We got business here to settle before we do much fighting ourselves. Go tell the Land Prophets that I said for them to pick a man with a rifle and get him, first swing. Then as soon as we get this over, we'll be there."

"Maybe we ought to go fight first," Ezra said, hopefully.

Pat shook his head. "Not first off before we finish this. If anything should happen to Harvey Kelso before he got these things signed, a lot of folks wouldn't maybe get their land back. So we finish this first."

Pat turned to the ranchers. "As soon as you get your places back and straightened out, you can go out and start working your guns."

THE WORK went on. Then suddenly, there was wild screaming and yelling, and bullets crashed against the house.

Pat rose from his chair. "How can a gent concentrate on work while there's fighting to do?"

He whipped out both guns, turned at the door. "Maggie, take that shotgun off the wall and see that Harvy Kelso goes on with his work."

"Not on your life," she said. "If there's fighting against Frank Dupree I'll be in there, too."

"I thought you was in love with Dupree. You turned and told him all about what I was going to do."

Maggie shook her head. "That wasn't love of Frank Dupree that made me do that. That was trying to make myself think I hated you."

She stood looking at him steadily and there seemed to be pleading in her eyes. Then she turned away and glanced at Kelso. "All right. Whatever you say, Pat."

The noise outside was bedlam. A hundred men or more were yelling and riding about the circle of wagons. The morning sun beat down upon the scene, made it stark and bare and blinding.

Guns were barking from every direction. A cow bellowed and went waddling in fright down through the camp. A woman screamed and ran for her wagon.

Men of the Land Prophets lay on the ground under the wagons, their rifles propped on wheel rims or spokes, taking aim carefully at the drunken miners and gun fighters that Frank Dupree had hired.

Pat ran to the south edge of the wagon circle. He crouched there and a bullet whistled above his hat. He saw a familiar figure riding by and took aim with his right-hand gun. He pulled the trigger, but only a miracle shot could have hit Frank Dupree at that range.

He was riding crafty, keeping two or three of his men between him and the wagon circle, shouting orders to them as they rode. Pat heard him, yell, "Ride wide and pick off what you can, then gradually close in."

That was the old Indian style of doing the job on a wagon train.

The men rode hard. The horses were heaving and blowing, but their riders were drunk for blood. Now and then one would take a bottle from

his pocket and pour more courage down his gullet.

A miner tipped off his horse and fell sprawling. His foot caught in the stirrup and the horse ran off with him, dragging him far across the valley.

A Land Prophet cried out, rose and fell backward and lay still. A young man leaped in to take his elder's place. A bullet found him and dropped him.

Pat saw the gun-throwing border rat that had done the job. In bitter anger he leveled his six-guns at Gurky, pulled the triggers and kept them firing, thumbing back the hammers.

Gurky jerked his head, saw where the fire was coming from, aimed at the spot where Pat crouched. Then, Gurky swayed in the saddle. His head lolled back on his thick neck, and he swayed in a wider arc and pitched head-first off the saddle.

A HORSE broke from the running mass. He was riderless and his stirrups flapped free in the wind. He raced straight for the wagon train, leaped between two wagons and went charging across the opening of the camp.

"Pat! Pat!" Mary Scott's voice was shrill above the other sounds.

Pat rose and waved a hand and dropped again.

She came running down after him and he got up and went to meet her. He caught her in a space between two wagons and pushed her to the ground. "What you trying to do, get yourself shot?"

Her eyes were full of panic. "My father," she said. "He's dying. He ordered me to get you."

They ran back through the melee the way she had come.

Elder Scott lay on the ground beside his wagon. One of the women of the group was bathing a bad wound in his side, near the heart.

Scott looked up at Pat and raised his hand, weakly. "You've been good —to us," he said. "I want you to take charge. I'm afraid I'm going fast. See that we're led properly. See that we win—the fight."

Pat bowed his head. "I'll do what I can. It's kind of a principle, winning this fight, I reckon. If folks like you can win this kind of fight, then there's a chance for decent folks."

Elder Scott's eyes had closed. He lay still. Pat ran his hand over his chest, felt for heart action. "Keep watch over him. He's still pumping. Try to stop that blood from running out of him."

He ran out again to the center of the camp circle and across it, keeping low. A hail of bullets followed him. He began making the rounds of the wagons where the Prophets lay firing their guns.

"Stick to your rifles or shotguns," Pat said. "Use the thing that'll get 'em surest." He came to Adam Bates nursing a nicked shoulder between shots with his shotgun. "You go over to Scott's wagon," Pat said. "Take your shooting irons along. Mary needs you bad. The elder is in bad shape."

Adam studied Pat for a split second. "Thanks," he said, and was gone, running fast across to the Scott wagon.

Men were bellowing orders and from outside came the steady yells of Dupree's drunken gun fighters shooting at the ring of wagons as they rode.

A tall woman of the Land Prophets screamed, then fell on her face and lay still.

Pat started after her, but turned back. The fighting was heaviest now. It was time to fight, not to look after the dead and wounded.

He caught up a single-shot Sharps rifle lying beside a dead Land Prophet and he lay on his belly and began picking off riders, one at a time. They swerved near him and fired in volleys and ran their horses off away from the circle again.

Someone was bellowing from the other side of the circle. It sounded like Dupree's hoarse voice but he couldn't be sure. Then, the horsemen began riding wider and turning toward one point.

Adam Bates came over with some of the younger men. Half of them

had blood on them and Adam's face was full of dirt and sweat.

"You figure they've gone for good?"

Pat shook his head. "I'm mighty afraid they just went off to rest their horses and to cook up something worse," he said. "How you figure we made out?"

"That's hard to tell," a stocky young Prophet said. "There's a heap of hurt and dead. We ain't started to count and take stock yet but we're going to right now."

"We don't stand much chance if they come back," a heavy-set young buck said. "They're licking us something fierce over on my side."

"They can't lick us," Adam said. "Even if they do come back with new tricks, we'll stick it out."

The grandstand side of the hero was coming out in him again, and Pat couldn't help admiring him for it. He could see how the other youngsters took courage from him. Pat said, "How's Elder Scott doing?"

"He's sleeping," Adam said. "But he's real bad."

"We'd better begin carrying the wounded into the house and laying them on the floor," Pat said. "That Dupree varmint is coming back soon as they all get rested and liquored up fresh and we sure want the decks cleared for more action when he does come."

EZRA had Harvey Kelso locked up in the little back bedroom again. Pat said, "Get him out of there and put a gun in his hand. He might as well get in this fight, since he don't like Dupree any better than the rest of us."

Kelso came out. "I'd be glad to fight Dupree with the rest of you," he offered.

Pat looked at Ezra. "Has he got everything deeded over and straight?"

"Everything," Kelso said. "I'll be glad even to go into town and get Bull Shard, if he's still alive, to round up the men I hired and—"

"We got enough of a war on without making it worse," Pat broke in. "I reckon we'll fight our own battles without the help of hired gun fighters. But if you want, you can go out and throw some lead on your own account," He nodded to Ezra. "Get him a shooting iron, rifle, shotgun, or six-gun. Whatever he fancies, and kind of see that he uses it on the right people."

Pat turned as the door swung back. A big black-bearded man stood in the doorway, almost filling it. With him was a younger, smaller man.

"Ben Kelly!" Pat gasped. "What you doing here?"

Maggie McCabe, who had entered the room quietly a moment before, caught her breath. Her eyes were riveted on the doorway, too, but not on Ben Kelly. "Dennis!" she cried. "What are you doing here in—"

Behind the two men in the doorway were two young Land Prophets, their guns stuck in the others' backs. "They said they were friends of yours," the taller guard said.

"I said it," Ben Kelly boomed. "And if I can't say I'm a friend of Pat Stevens now, I don't reckon I ever can." He nodded to the young man with him. "This young gent rode into town looking for a man named Frank Dupree. And he said he'd heard his sister had drifted up this way, too. Said her name was Maggie McCabe."

Dennis McCabe was a careless-looking, handsome young Irish devil. He grinned at his sister, said, "You been gone a long time. I got worried about you. Started out looking for you. Looks like you got yourself in a sure enough mess this time, Mag."

"I'm fighting on the right side this time, Dennis," she said proudly.

"You came up to see Dupree, didn't you?" Dennis wasn't smiling now.

Maggie bit her lip. Her eyes lowered. "Yes, but I swear, Dennis, I'm cured of him now."

"I'm sure you're going to be if you aren't." McCabe's hands swung slightly closer to the two long-barreled six-guns hanging low on his legs. "I come up to see to that, Mag."

Maggie bit her lip again but she didn't try to stop him. She said simply, "I heard you were coming. That is, I heard somebody about your size had been inquiring for me, along the

trail. I figured it was either you, or—"

"Clany?" Dennis interrupted. "You always been scared of Clany. Scared he was going to kill you like he said he would, for teaming up with Dupree once against him. Well, Clany wasn't so white. You got nothing to fear from him, either, Mag. He's hanging from a high spruce limb up in Montana, from what I heard, if the buzzards ain't got him pecked to pieces by now."

Maggie shuddered, didn't answer.

"So Dupree is riding herd on this psalm-signing outfit," Dennis McCabe said. "Good thing I got here when I did. Where you figure he's at now?"

Pat pointed out the window. "Over that ridge, resting their horses and getting liquored for another attack, I reckon. You're welcome to stay for the fun if you want, you two." Pat nodded to the two guards. "What ever they decide, they're all right to stay or go as they like. You can go back to your posts now."

A shout went up from outside.

"They're coming again!"

Dennis McCabe stiffened.

Pat glanced out of the window, reached for the buffalo gun he'd brought in with him. "They're coming and there's Frank Dupree drunk enough to ride right plumb in the lead."

"He don't look drunk to me," Dennis said. He turned from the window, reached for his guns, spun their cylinders. "He looks like he's gone wild and I'm the gent that's going to tame him."

HE DIVED for the door with Ben Kelly's big form right behind him. Inside, Maggie stood for a split second with her teeth clenched. She closed her eyes and her fists grew tight. Then she seemed to relax and she began working among the wounded as fast as she could move.

Pat rushed outside. He ran to the side of the wagon circle and dropped to his knees beside one of the big rear wheels. He got a line on the rider just going by, but he was far away. Pat pulled on him, and the rider leaned forward as he dashed past.

They were doing that, leaning down and rising as they rode. And it made them hard to hit. He pushed another shell into the chamber, took aim and blasted again, and again he missed. He cursed furiously.

They were still far away, starting the circle wide. They were going to work in gradually. And all of the time they fired at random at spots along the bases of the wagons where the Prophets and the ranchers knelt or lay prone, gunning at them riding by.

The rearing, plunging horses were fresh again from their rest. The noon sun was beating down, a blinding light on the moving men. They raced past, and then a great shout went up at the far end of the camp opposite the barn and corral.

No one in that section of the camp seemed to be concentrating on the fighting in his sector. Pat saw men rear up and stare at the action down by the end of the wagon circle.

Suddenly, Pat was running, too. The line of men had doubled. He stood confused, trying to figure it out. Dupree had started his men in two lines when they had come down off the ridge. Those two lines, riding furiously, had circled, one in one direction and the other going around the other side of the wagon circle. But now they had joined forces. A double line of them, weaving and swaying in their saddles, were running straight for the small gap in the wagon train where a group of women were huddled to stay out of the line of bullets.

Pat yelled to them, "Get out of the way. The devils are coming through there."

Quickly Pat ran to the center, waving his arms and his gun. "Drop to the ground," he shouted, "all of you. Drop and face that gap in the wagons where Dupree and his men are coming through. Face that and cut them down."

Some of the men heard him. They dropped and others, seeing them fall

into line, did the same.

Dupree swerved, turned back, waved his men on ahead. He motioned them into the breach ahead of him and Pat saw his move.

"The cowardly skunk," Pat roared. He tried to cut Dupree down with the buffalo gun. He got a bead on him, pulled the trigger and the hammer snapped down. But that was all. No more ammunition. Pat threw it aside, drew his six-guns. But he'd have to wait for the attackers to come to him at closer range if he was to do proper damage with those.

The drunken riders were coming in at full gallop. A woman screamed and dived for a little girl who had gone running in panic before her, straight in front of the onrushing horses.

Pat dashed after the girl, holstering his guns as he ran. He yelled, but the little girl was too frightened to hear what he said or to turn back if she caught his meaning.

Pat reached the girl, snatched her in his arms and tried to straighten. Something caught in his back. That old wound had him doubled. He tried to force himself to straighten, couldn't get up. The woman rushed over, stopped and half-lifted him, took the girl out of his arms.

Pat stood there at the side, half bent, in terrible pain.

Dupree let out a yell from the other side of the wagon circle. He had seen Pat in trouble. He cut his horse to the side, aimed at a break between two other wagons to the north of the entrance gap.

Ringo yelled behind Dupree. They came racing together at Pat. Pat stood half-doubled, trying to work the kink out of his back. He forgot he would have to draw his guns, forgot that those men would be coming to kill him. He forgot everything but that sudden, burning pain.

RINGO was the first to leap his horse through the gap and over the tongue of one of the wagons. Ringo was coming at him, with guns blazing.

Pat bent lower, ducked a shower of lead, then straightened suddenly. For the pain had partly gone out of his back—enough so that he could draw and take aim.

Ringo, nerves taut, reined his horse about and ran for cover, crouched over the saddle to get out of the line of fire.

A wild yell sounded from behind Pat. Dennis McCabe was on a horse, bareback, and digging his heels into the black beast. He was after Ringo with his guns out and flaming,

Frank Dupree tried to rein his horse just before he followed Ringo through the wagon circle. But the big beast that Dupree rode took the leap in beautiful style, cleared the singletrees and the wagon tongue and a packing box on the ground and came charging on as Pat whirled to face him.

Dupree's face was white. He went for his guns.

Pat waited until Dupree had drawn his, waited until the gambler was ready to pull his triggers.

Their guns exploded almost simultaneously. A bullet burned past Pat's cheek, and he could feel the breeze of it past his ear. But his own guns were blasting. The shock of their explosions ran up his arms, and his back was taking hold again, bending him double.

Pat ducked, doubled, could hardly see ahead of him for the pain. Dupree's horse swerved harder, bolted and ran back the way it had come.

A heavy body crashed on Pat. He groaned with the shock of it.

They were going down together in a struggling, tangled heap.

17

PAT HEAVED his tortured muscles, trying to free himself from the paralyzing load on top of him. When the weight had landed on him, it had seemed as if the man had been beating, pounding, attacking him. But now life was gone

and it was merely dead weight to be thrust off. He managed to get out from under.

Pat stayed half-bent as he moved. It was better that way. The pain in his back didn't bother him nearly so much.

Finally he managed to stand. And he looked down at the body that had fallen on him.

Dupree lay on the ground, stretched grotesquely in the brilliant sunlight. The gambler's face, with the staring eyes, was turned up to him. There was blood on the brocaded vest and on the black, flowing tie.

Pat tried to straighten more. The shooting had died down about him. Ben Kelly's voice bellowed, "You sure got even with that Dupree varmint, I reckon. You took him fair and square and final, for sure, Stevens."

There didn't seem to be much satisfaction in it for Pat, now that it was done. He turned his head and saw some of the Land Prophets on horses, chasing the last of the fleeing renegade gunmen.

A voice yelled, "We'd likely lost it if it hadn't been for Stevens there, rallying us when we was going crazy." The voice sounded like John Boyd's.

A horse galloped up and a man dismounted, and a young voice said, "That you, Stevens, bent over? You hurt bad?"

"Not much. An old wound. Got me in the back." Pat tried to straighten —saw Dennis McCabe before the pain hit him harder.

McCabe pulled up the back of his shirt. "Hey, that old wound opened up bad. You must have strained it."

"Pulled it apart making a dive for a little girl who was about to get run over."

"Looks bad," McCabe said. "I'll help you to the house. Maggie'll fix you up." He pulled down Pat's shirt tail. "Maggie can fix up anything. She's a great girl, or she was before she met Dupree."

They struggled along toward the house. McCabe said, "I had Dupree picked for my meat but I guess you had first right to him, from what I've heard."

"What about Ringo?"

"He won't bother nobody again. But I sure would like to have got Dupree."

"You certainly hated that gent."

"And everything about him," Dennis snarled. "Now maybe I can get Maggie to settle down. I bought a nice little ranch for us a while back. I been hoping I'd find Maggie.

They had entered the ranch yard, and now they made their way, slowly, painfully, into the house. Almost the entire first floor was filled with the wounded from both sides.

Maggie, with some Land Prophet women and Mary, was working among them, bandaging and caring for the injured. Maggie stopped by a dark, little chunky figure as Pat and Dennis came in. She said, "Look, you dark-skinned little shrimp, you aren't any worse hurt than the others. Now shut that mouth of yours and wait till I can get a chance to come take care of you."

Pat looked at the patient. It was Sam Sloan. The swarthy little man glared at Maggie, and said, "All you do is fuss over that red-bearded giant, Ezra. Anybody would think he was dying. And here I am with bullet in my shoulder and you brush me by like I was last year's almanac."

She stopped, turned on him. "All right, big mouth. I'll do something for you. Tear off that shirt and let me have a look at your shoulder."

"It hurts to tear it off. You cut it off."

"And you're a big baby besides," Maggie said. "Here." She caught hold of Sam shirt and ripped it across so that his chest and bloody shoulder were visible. She knelt down beside him, fingered the wound. "I ought to be calling you names the way you talked about me and shot at me that time. I ought to be giving you all kinds of trouble, now that I got you here, but—" She got up. "You aren't hurt," she snapped. "All you got is a bullet crease in the shoulder. A deep

(Continued On Page 90)

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It Rained Rattlesnakes!

by L. C. Davis

A YOUNG MEXICAN sheepherder discovered Rattlesnake Cave in the Pecos country of Western Texas, but had he known of the cavern's tenants he would have given it a wide berth. As it was, curiosity overcame him and he wriggled through the barrel-like opening.

It was pitch dark in there and the lad lit a soltol stalk. He had proceeded but a few yards when he heard a rattle and was horrified to see a huge rattlesnake reared up high and ready to strike. But the big snake was only the bass soloist of a huge choir of reptiles—tenors, baritones and sopranos—that set up an awful din like a mill full of buzz saws.

Outside, he started to throw the other rock away when he noticed how heavy it was. He took one glance at it and his heart started pounding again. Hiding it in a bandanna he took it to Ozona, where the banker got excited about it, too, since it was a crude block of mixed silver and gold, evidently part of a lost mine.

All efforts of the banker and others to learn the location of the cave failed. The boy's mother, and the padre, both warned him not to tell, and the lad died later of bullet wounds rather than tell.

Ranger Neal Russell investigated and concluded that the boy was running away from his questioners when a bullet, evidently fired to scare him, lodged in his thigh and proved fatal. He passed his information above the cave's probably whereabouts, on to Wes Burton.

Near the Chihuahua Trail Burton found evidences of an explosion and a multitude of rattlesnake rattles and bones. On the way back to join his companion, Preacher Crum, he killed two rattlesnakes, and Crum had killed one. A cowpoke rode up to their camp.

"Yep, it's rattlesnake country all right," he agreed. "We threw a stick of dynamite into a hole up yonder a ways and blew out thousands of 'em. Did you say 'Rattlesnake Cave'? Well, now, maybe that was the name for it." And his eyes held a strange, faraway glitter.

One thing after another prevented the explorers from investigating, but when they returned a year later they found that Cox, the cowpoke, was the owner of a huge ranch, evidently bought with the fortune taken from Rattlesnake Cave.

THE END

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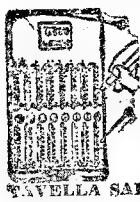

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 87)

one. But the bullet's out. Go wash it off and get out of my way. There's others that got real trouble."

Sam got up, shaking his head. "Yes, ma'am," he said meekly. "Only will you bandage it, if I wash it? I only got one hand for bandaging a shoulder."

"All right," Maggie said. "Now get out of here. We need the room."

AS PAT entered the room with Dennis' help, a cry came from the far corner. Mary Scott threaded her way toward Pat. "You're hurt—badly," she whispered.

"Not so bad but what I can still navigate. How's your dad?"

"We've got him in the front bedroom. I'm taking care of him, but he's quiet and resting now. I think he'll be all right in time."

"Sure glad to hear that." Pat looked around for Adam Bates—wasn't any use having Adam see Mary fussing over him—before saying, "Where's my girl friend, Maggie? You seen her, Mary?"

The girl's face darkened. "Maggie?" She studied him for an instant. "She—she was here a minute ago."

"She was busy then, I reckon."

"I can take care of you," Mary said.

Pat shook his head. "I don't reckon some folks would like that, Adam and Maggie for instance. And you're doing good, Mary, for some worse off than me. Your dad needs you close, too."

"All right," she said. "If you don't want me to help you."

"It ain't that. Only we just got finished with a war and we got to keep things as peaceful as we can from now on."

He sat down on the floor, leaned gingerly against the wall. Dennis went into the next room.

Mary, hesitating, glanced at a young man being brought in by two other men. There was blood on the wounded one and she turned, suddenly. "Adam," she cried. "Adam!" There was a choke in her voice as she flew to him.

They laid Adam on the floor in an empty place and Mary knelt down beside him, began unbuttoning his shirt. Another one of the Land Prophet women came over to help her. Except for an occasional groan from the wounded, the house was quiet. The women worked on, efficiently, noiselessly. They swam before Pat's spinning brain. He let himself relax against the wall and closed his eyes.

He could hear Mary's soft voice talking to Adam. "We'll get the bullet out right away. Then you won't hurt so much." That was good it was working out like that. Mary going to Adam where she belonged. He'd make a fine man with a little more experience and a curb on his temper.

From far off he heard Maggie's voice. "Pat. You're hurt bad. Wake up and let me look at you."

She knelt down beside him, examined his wound and turned to her brother. "I just finished a man up in the back bedroom and sent him home. He wasn't hurt so bad. Help Pat up there."

Dennis helped Pat up the stairs. Maggie came with hot water and torn sheets for bandages. Together they got Pat into the bed and got his clothes off around his wound. Maggie's hands were softer than Pat had ever imagined they could be. Her touch was gentle and soothing. He had a feeling that he'd like to have her stay there always.

"There," she said. "You're all right now. I've got to see about some of the others. You stay still and don't get up or move." She gave his cheek a soft pat. Then she and Dennis went downstairs.

WHEN PAT opened his eyes, Ezra was grinning down at him. "You all right, Pat?" the big redhead asked anxiously, and, when Pat nodded his head, gently, "Company come to see you. A friend of yours."

Charlie Anson poked his white hair and red, watery eyes into the door. He grinned. "Hey, Pat, I hear that was some fight. Darn it all, I missed it, though. I was coming but I kind of overslept on account of big doings

(Continued On Page 92)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 91)

last night and—and I missed the whole show. They tell me it was the best fight in the county."

"Go on, you little bloodthirsty buzzard," Pat said. "I hope you never have another fight like that in this county to miss or watch either."

Charlie Anson chuckled. "Hey, Pat. Look what I brought you. Always it's you buying drinks for me. But everybody cleared out of the saloon to go riding with Frank Dupree this morning and so I just naturally brought one of his best bottles with me." He pulled the cork, wiped off the neck on his greasy sleeve. "Take a good hooker, Pat. It's good for what ails you."

"Later, thanks, Charlie," Pat said.

"In that case, I'll have to drink for both of us," Charlie said.

Maggie's voice sounded from the hall. "Listen here, you red-eyed little Santa Claus. Take that bottle away from Pat and get downstairs before I hogtie you and throw you out the window."

Ezra coughed. He swallowed and blushed and Charlie ducked past Maggie and clattered down the stairs with Ezra after him.

Maggie came in, smiling a little. "That Ezra's mighty nice to me. Sure hate to scare him that way." She studied Pat. Her voice softened, "How you feeling?"

"A lot better, thanks to you."

She kept staring down at him, and at last settled on the side of the bed and ran her hand over his forehead.

"You did a great job, getting things straight, Pat. I'm mighty proud of you."

Pat, sensing what was coming, was trying to decide what to do about it.

"Everybody's proud of you, too, Maggie," Pat said. "If it hadn't been for you, knowing what to do with the sick and wounded, we'd all been in a bad way."

She rubbed the back of his hand gently. "It wasn't much. Maybe it'll help to make up for a lot of things—in the past."

Pat couldn't think of the right

things to say. He lay still, waiting.

"You're pretty wonderful, Pat."

"So are you," he said.

There was a long moment of silence.

"Pat," she said, "I've been wondering—I mean about us. I've been wondering if we'd—well, get along. That is—"

"I reckon anybody could get along with you, Maggie, if he treated you right."

"You think so?"

Pat hesitated. "You sure did a wonderful job of taking care of everybody." He kept stalling for the right words to ease off what Maggie was aiming at.

"If it hadn't been for you, the Land Prophets and the ranchers would have lost out, sure," she said.

"Things just naturally worked out." Pat changed the subject. "Anybody heard anything about Harvey Kelso? How did he come out in the second batch of fighting?"

"You know," she said, "I believe he came out just about the way he wanted to. He didn't have much to live for. And maybe down under he had a good streak."

"He was killed?"

She nodded once. "They brought him in with a bullet in his neck but he was gone from loss of blood before we could do anything for him."

"Sure glad we got the ranches and land straightened before he died."

"That's what I'm saying. If it hadn't been for you—"

"You got a pretty wonderful brother there, Maggie. You know that?"

"Sure I know it," she said. "But we were talking about you. The way you got them to fight and fought yourself." She was looking steadily into his gray eyes. "You're about the most wonderful human I ever—"

"Like I was saying," Pat said. "That brother Dennis of yours. I want to tell you, Maggie, there's a wonderful lad."

"He's a good kid," she said.

Pat closed his eyes. He braced himself to say what he knew must say to break it as gently as he could.

(Continued On Page 96)

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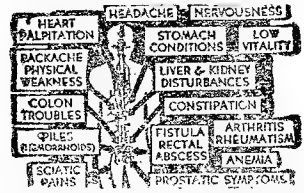

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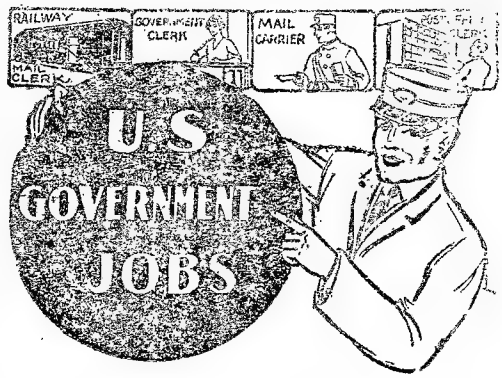

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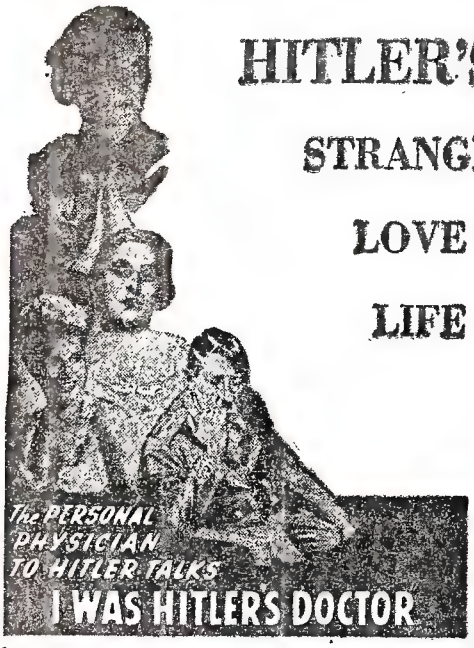

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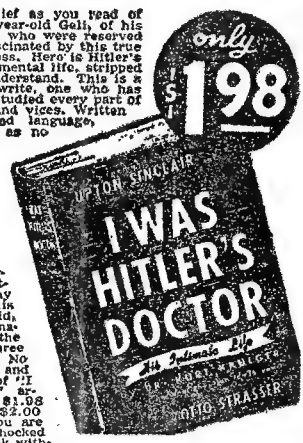

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(Continued From Page 93)

"Dennis has plans, too," Pat said. "Maybe you don't know it, but—"

"You're changing the subject," Maggie said, a little desperately. "We were talking about you." Her eyes were steady upon him and he could feel the cold dampness of her hands holding his. "There's only one thing wrong here, at your Lazy Mare ranch. You need a woman to take care of you."

PAT COUGHED and pain shot through him. He swallowed, and felt weak, and color rushed to heat his face.

"I know about your wife and boy," Maggie went on softly, "I heard all about them. I've been asking about you. But you can't bury yourself here alone, now that they're gone."

Pat was trying hard to think things out and get his words straight. "Ezra and Sam," he said, "will take pretty good care of me. And that brother of yours—"

She was studying him carefully, but trying not to seem anxious now. Gradually, she let his hand slip from hers. She forced a smile. "Dennis *is* a pretty wonderful kid, isn't he?"

He read the disappointment in her eyes. But she was a worldly woman and it hadn't taken her long to learn the trend of things.

"And he needs you," Pat said.

She looked concerned, seemed to forget for the moment what they had been drifting toward. "Something's wrong with Dennis?"

Pat cleared his throat the way he usually did when he was bringing up a lie.

"Not yet. But he's been drifting, he tells me."

There was fear in her face, and Pat hastened to reassure her.

"Not far wrong yet. I wouldn't want you to tell him that I told you, but it seems he's been getting a bad start of late. Kind of afraid he was beginning to run with the wrong kind. So he went and bought a ranch, hoping that you'd come live with him and help keep him straight."

Maggie stiffened. "Did he say that?"

"Cross my heart," Pat said.

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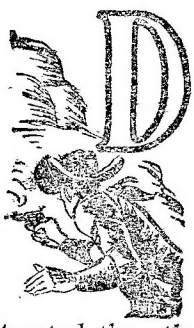
Maggie got up slowly, a purposeful expression on her face. "I'm mighty glad you told me, Pat. I sure do want to look after Dennis. I wouldn't want anything to happen to him for the world."

"I knew you wouldn't."

"I've been kind of blind about my own brother," she went on. "I've been so set on feathering my own nest, I haven't been thinking enough about him. Dennis has been needing a home worse than anybody all along. You got Sam and Ezra to look after you. You don't need any more, really." She smiled down at him and got to her feet. "Thanks a heap, Pat, for setting me straight. I won't ever forget you."

She turned before he could answer and walked out of the room.

18



DURING the days that followed, while Maggie stayed with the others to help care for the wounded, she never mentioned their talk. She changed his bandages and watched over him tenderly, but impersonally, just as she treated the other men.

Those of the Land Prophets who were well enough went back to live in their wagons. Maggie got Mrs. Brice up and about and she in turn began caring for Luke, who had gotten a bullet in his thigh, and others of their group.

Pat could move about a little now. He went into the room next door occasionally to talk with Elder Scott and young Adam. They were both coming along nicely.

One morning while he was in there, a shout went up from the yard. It was one of the Land Prophets roaring out a warning. "There's a band of riders coming over the ridge just like the last attack Dupree made."

Pat raised himself out of the chair. He paused to listen, moving toward

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 97)

the door as he cocked an ear, his mind on his six-guns and belts that had been hanging over his bedpost.

A bugle sounded off toward the ridge and Pat froze in the hall.

"It's a company of Cavalry," he said. "They're heading this way from Dutch Springs."

The horses were galloping down the slope, over the shortcut. The troop circled the front of the house, and the captain and his orderly got down and walked to the front door.

In the upstairs hall, Pat could hear the captain ask for the leader of the Land prophets. He stood still and motioned the captain in when he climbed the stairs.

The officer held his hat in his hand and his hair was cut short and stiff across the top. He walked into the side bedroom where Pat motioned him and bowed. "Elder Scott?" he said.

The elder acknowledged the name.

"Suh," the captain said in a fine Southern drawl, "I'm mighty sorry there's been an error to cause you all the trouble you've had. We came over as quickly as we could when we received word from Washington that the error had been discovered. There's been a mistake, suh, in the orders and papers the government issued you."

"A mistake?" Elder Scott said. "I don't see how—"

"You were given rights to certain property in Dutch Springs," the captain said. "But as you probably know now, no such property descriptions exist here. No one knows how the error occured. But the word Dutch was substituted for Duluth. You should have been sent to Duluth Springs."

"Duluth Springs?" Elder Scott repeated. "Where is that? Not far, I hope."

"It's about three days' easy journey by wagon to the west of here," the captain said. "Plenty of good, rich soil there, suh. And we have orders to escort you there and see that you have safe arrival and protection while you settle on your rightful land."

TWO DAYS later Pat, Ezra and Sam stood before the Lazy Mare ranch house and watched the last of the wagons wind across the valley and disappear in the pass through the Culebra Range, heading west.

When the wagons were out of sight, Pat turned toward the house. "Seems kind of empty here," he said. "But I reckon we'll like it a heap better than having a war on every little while." He took a deep breath and moved his sore back. "Good to have stretching room again."

Ezra said, "Pat, let's you and me ride down to Dutch Springs and see how the town is now that it's back near where it was."

"You and him?" Sam snorted. "Where you get the idea you and Pat are going down there? What you figure I'm gonna do?"

"You're gonna stay here and look after the stock, that's what. After all those ranchers chipped in to stock up Pat's place with new cattle in gratitude for what he done, we don't want anything happening to it."

"Why you one-eyed, red-headed—"

"Don't fly off the handle," Pat cut in. "Ezra was only joking with you. Seems like you never will know when Ezra means what he says and when he's joking."

"I wasn't joking, neither," Ezra insisted. "Sam's always bragging about he knows so much more about cattle than me. Well, he can be close to cattle and I'll be close to humans —like Pat."

Sam's dark face turned purple. "Now look here, you big gorilla," he growled and started for Ezra.

Pat broke out in a chuckle. He caught Sam and turned him around. And for the first time in a year, Pat Stevens was laughing. "You two do a man more good than sulphur and molasses in the spring," he said. "And nobody's going no place until we can all three go together. That's the way we've always done everything and that's the way it's always going to be."

THE END

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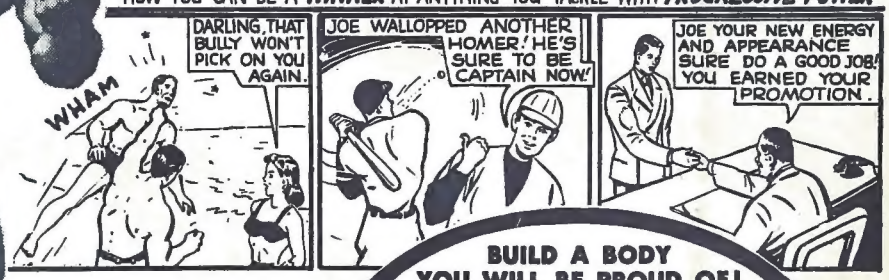

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